

BBC World Histories

The Big Questions

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Did the Age of Exploration do more
harm than good? This issue, our experts
tackle the biggest historical questions
shaping the world of the 21st century

World Histories

The Big Questions in History

**SPECIAL
COMPILATION
ISSUE**

Did the Age of Exploration do more harm than good?

How has migration changed the world?

Should we judge historical figures by today's morals?

Why did the west dominate for so long?

Should museums return their treasures?

Are revolutions doomed to failure?

... and more



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Global thinking

The world in two hemispheres, depicted on a 17th-century map. This issue, our experts debate the historical issues that shape the 21st century, from conflict and colonialism to politics and prejudice

Welcome to this special issue of *BBC World Histories* magazine, looking back at some of the best features from the past four years.

Originally published between 2016 and 2019, the articles collected here explore the history behind some of the most important current-affairs stories of the 21st century. Largely taken from our regular series of Big Question features, they ask individual historians or panels of experts to tackle issues as diverse as **the lingering effects of the Cold War, the ways in which migration shapes today's world**, and whether **museums should return treasures** taken from other parts of the globe. Written by leading figures including Deborah Lipstadt, David Abulafia, Catherine Merridale and Gus Casely-Hayford, they offer thought-provoking takes on the past inside the present. Indeed, some continue to make headlines: **the removal of public statues of controversial figures**, as happened with an effigy of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol this summer, is a subject debated from page 80.

All of the pieces here were, however, written before the **ongoing coronavirus outbreak**, the effects of which – medical, economic, and social – have been felt in nearly every part of the world. We're still producing these issues from our homes and, though lockdown measures are being gradually lifted here in the UK as I write this in late June, the future is far from certain. We will be back for a second special issue on 10 September, featuring some

of the magazine's best features on global expeditions and discoveries. Until then, from all of us in the team, I hope that you and those around you stay safe and well.

Matt Elton

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Why did the west dominate for so long?

For centuries 'the west' exercised global dominance without parallel in history – but what were the conditions that allowed a small cluster of nations to control swathes of the world for so long? Seven historians offer their expert opinions

Arne Westad**“Europe has always been culturally, religiously, and – most importantly – politically diverse”**

For most of the time since the dawn of human civilisation, Asia has been in the lead, economically and technologically. Exactly when the ascent of Europe and its cultural offshoots began is hotly debated. Some see its roots in antiquity (highly contestable) or the Renaissance (more plausible, but doubtful – a comparison between Ming China and Tudor Britain is not necessarily to the latter’s advantage). It is more likely that western predominance started with the industrial revolution, and may be ending with the information revolution.

If one accepts this timeline, the rise of Europe was based on access to resources (especially energy) and technologies. The former advantage was to some extent a fluke – the fact that coal could be found reasonably close to the surface in parts of Europe has little to do with the Europeans – but the development of technology was not. It is quite possible that a system of contending states, and weakening religious governance, was a factor in creating space for innovation and markets. Spin-offs from military technologies and organisation also furthered research and state development. This form of modernity was found only in Europe (or, rather, in parts of it), and goes a long way towards explaining European predominance since the 18th century.

The concept of ‘the west’, though, is problematic. Talking about ‘north Atlantic societies’ makes more sense. Large areas of Europe were not particularly advanced, at least compared with parts of Asia or Latin America, until the middle of the 20th century. In contrast, some parts of Asia had markets and infrastructure that competed quite well with those of the Europeans until at least 1900 (and, in the case of Japan, long after that).

If ‘the west’ is taken to mean Europe and its offshoots in the Americas and Oceania, it has always been culturally, religiously, and – most importantly – politically diverse. The Soviet Union was in this sense part of the west, though many non-Europeans were quicker in adapting to US-led globalisation than the Russians remain to this day.



Arne Westad is Elihu Professor of History and Global Affairs at Yale University, and an expert on contemporary international history and the eastern Asian region

Kathleen Burk**“Imposing political control requires military and sometimes naval power”**

When considering this subject it’s worth thinking about what’s required to rule. Governing foreign lands requires a plenitude of money and a sustained will to wield power. The weapons required are military and economic power, and the ability to project them, supported by the control of communications. The power of political and economic ideas are much less important. ‘Rule’ comes in many guises. Conquering and imposing political control requires military and, sometimes, naval power. Overwhelming economic dominance requires financial and commercial power plus possibly military backup. However, economic control is stronger over the medium to long term if the use of force is restrained.

For centuries, western powers had the predominant ability to project power by land, sea and, later, air. From the early 18th century, Russia conquered a land empire and maintained control through overwhelming military power and the use of railways. By the 17th century, the Dutch, the Portuguese, the British, the French and the Spaniards all possessed the necessary experience and resources for oceanic conquest. Such strength normally trumps a huge population: consider the British in India, the Belgians in the Congo, and several western powers in China.

Having achieved political power, military and police power can be used to maintain it, especially if combined with divide-and-rule tactics – supporting elites against the rest, always the British preference, or backing one side in internal conflicts. Weapons wielded in maintaining economic power include the ability to mobilise and control finance – buying allies and paying bribes – and, with the modern international finance system, the power to choke off access to funds. Vital to both is the control of communications, an example being the British dominance of international cable traffic for a number of years.

Japan was the one country in either Asia or Africa that had, at least in part, the requisite strengths to wield power: military and naval power, including fully trained and equipped military forces able to defeat a western army (in the case of Japan, that of Russia); control over sustainable sources of finance; possession of rapid communications, internal or external; and internal cohesion. Japan remained independent. Hatred of the foreigner was not enough to save the other countries of Asia and Africa from western domination.



Kathleen Burk is emeritus professor of modern and contemporary history at University College London, specialising in Anglo-American relations and 20th-century history

Felipe Fernández-Armesto

“The basis of western dominance was technological, and technological gaps are traversable”

It depends what we mean by ‘dominate’ and ‘the west’, but for most of the past what we usually call the west was a remote and contemptible corner of Eurasia, while richer economies, more powerful polities and bigger, denser populations were concentrated in south-west, south, and east Asia.

The incorporation of the Americas changed the global balance of wealth, power and demographic potential, but the effects took a long time to register. The Renaissance was, perhaps, the first global movement – it reached parts of the Americas, Africa and Asia – but its impact was patchy and largely confined to elites. Christianity is the most culturally adaptable religion in the world, but it is doubtful whether we should class as western this oriental mystery-faith that started as a Jewish heresy. In the 17th century, Chinese respect for Jesuit astronomy and chronometry was a sign that western science and technology were in the ascendant, but China influenced the west in the 17th and 18th centuries at least as much as the other way round.

It took the Opium Wars to reverse China’s balance of trade in western favour. Meanwhile, industrialised and post-industrial economies began to spread from the west, along with concomitant politics and aesthetics, supplementing but not displacing rival ways of life. Even when western advantages – steam power, Maxim guns, tropical kit – were at their peak in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they alone could not guarantee domination: by the British, for instance, over Boers and Maoris; by Italians in Ethiopia; or by any foreigners in Japan.

If we generously allow western ‘domination’, in general, a term of perhaps about 200 years so far, the period seems a blip in the 200,000 years or so of the existence of *Homo sapiens*. Its basis has been technological, and technological gaps are traversable. With the recovery of China, the emergence of India as a potential superpower, and the rise of other challengers in a plural and interdependent world, it looks as if we are reverting to normalcy: influence exchanged among equipollent civilisations – of which the west is just one.



Felipe Fernández-Armesto holds the William P Reynolds chair for mission in arts and letters at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana

Ian Morris

“Applying both science and enlightenment to their economies, Europeans – not the Chinese – had an industrial revolution”

The answer has little to do with western culture, brilliance or hard work – westerners (by which I mean west Europeans and their overseas colonists) were just in the right place at the right time. In the 12th and 13th centuries Chinese mariners were building ships that could cross oceans. But because China was the richest place on earth, sailing all the way from Nanjing to India or Arabia turned out not to generate enough profits to be worthwhile.

For Europeans who picked up versions of this technology and built their own ocean-going vessels in the 15th century, though, things looked very different. Sailing toward China around the bottom of Africa was definitely profitable. Columbus proposed that sailing west across the Atlantic would get to China faster, and be more profitable still. He was mistaken, of course, but bumping into America turned out to be even more important.

Because the Atlantic is so much smaller than the Pacific – sailing 3,000 miles gets you from Spain to Mexico, whereas China to California is 5,000 miles – by 1600, Europeans had turned the Atlantic into a highway, which the Chinese could not possibly do with the Pacific. The Atlantic trading system became the greatest wealth-generating machine the planet had ever seen, and by 1750 Britain and Holland – the countries that dominated it – were richer even than China.

From there, everything else followed. Applying their best minds to figuring out how the tides and stars moved, Europeans – not the Chinese – had a scientific revolution. Applying scientific thought to their own societies, Europeans – not the Chinese – had an Enlightenment. And applying both science and enlightenment to their economies, Europeans – not the Chinese – had an industrial revolution. That is why the west has dominated the world for 200 years.

But it is also why western domination is now approaching its end. In the 20th century, as technologies shrank the Pacific Ocean just as 17th-century ones once shrank the Atlantic, east Asia began its own industrial revolution. The west is still on top – for now – but nothing lasts forever.



Ian Morris is Jean and Rebecca Willard professor of classics and a fellow of the Archaeology Center at Stanford University, and author of *Why the West Rules — For Now* (Profile Books, 2010)

Hakim Adi

“What might be referred to as the domination of Europe might more properly be seen as the rise to dominance of the capitalist economic system”

The question assumes that ‘the west’ has dominated for an incredibly long time – but of course it hasn’t. Even if the start of western – that is to say, European – dominance can be dated from Europe’s simultaneous maritime connections with Africa, Asia, and America in the 16th century, that is no more than 500 years. Indeed, it is doubtful if the countries of western Europe could be said to have dominated any other continent by the end of the 17th century, except perhaps for America where it is estimated that Europeans (and the diseases they brought with them) accounted for the deaths of up to 90% of the indigenous American population.

Whatever the case, 500 years cannot be considered a very long time in human history; to give one obvious example, the history of pharaonic Egypt was at least five times as long. Of course, we live in a particular era, and the Eurocentric arrogance of that era might suggest a certain permanence.

What might be referred to as the domination of Europe and its diaspora might more properly be seen as the rise to dominance of the new capitalist economic system. This emerged first in western Europe, and unleashed tremendous productive forces on the world, but it was based on the global exploitation of the majority of the world’s people by a few. However, compared with other preceding economic and political systems it cannot be said to have lasted very long, either. The future of capitalism also appears uncertain. If its dominance continues, it looks likely to pass to China and the ‘east.’

It’s also the case that history has already witnessed the first stages of the emergence of a new economic and political system, which its advocates refer to as socialism. That new system first appeared a century ago but its emergence suggests that both western dominance and the exploitation of the

many by the few might soon become history. In short, domination by the few in the west has not lasted so very long – but long enough.



Hakim Adi is professor of the history of Africa and the African diaspora at the University of Chichester

Rana Mitter

“A powerful factor was a vocabulary that came from the western political repertoire”

Language matters. And the domination of the way in which people in the ‘rest of the world’ use political language is one legacy of western expansion that remains relevant in the 21st century. Even today, when China has become the world’s second-biggest economy, and the expansion of India and Brazil is a story of global significance, discourse is still dominated by political language that spread in the 18th and 19th centuries.

As late as the mid-19th century, China could still lay claim to dominance across much of east Asia. This was not necessarily imperial control; Japan, for example, was never under Chinese rule. But much of the region – China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam – operated using language and norms that came from China’s long history of Confucian bureaucratic thinking. The system of ‘tribute’ (actually a form of ritual relationship in which the peoples paying ‘tribute’ to China gained rather than lost financially) was one part of this. Ethnic groups who occupied China, such as the Manchus who established the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), adapted themselves to Chinese court and bureaucratic systems, even as they promoted their own ethnic customs.

The world dominated by Confucian norms came to an abrupt end in the mid-19th century with the arrival of western gunboats and opium. But more powerful still was a vocabulary that came from the western political repertoire. In fact, much of this vocabulary came through Japan during the Meiji period when Japan eagerly embraced many aspects of westernisation. So terms such as *kokka* (country) came into Chinese, rendered as *guojia*, while *kempō* (constitution) became *xianfa*, both terms being written with the same characters in both languages.

For much of the century that followed, China has had to fit its political destiny into a vocabulary defined by terms that originated elsewhere: a republic run according to a political system largely drawn from Marxism. Despite recent attempts to insert ‘Confucian’ norms into today’s China, there is little doubt that its system of government will not become a traditional *tianxia* (‘all under heaven’) anytime soon.

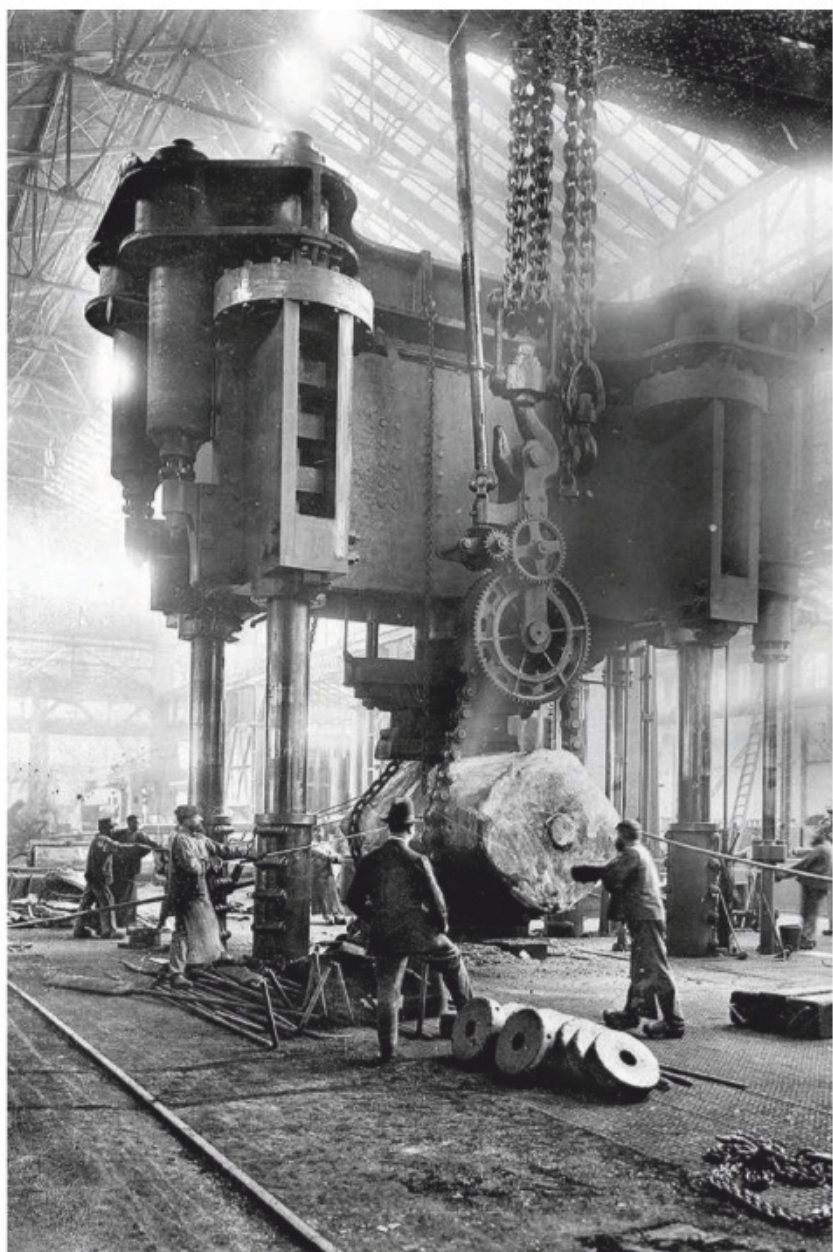
And China is not alone in this: ‘linguistic domination’ remains one of the west’s most powerful legacies to the rest of the world.



Rana Mitter is professor of the history and politics of modern China at the University of Oxford



Tea is weighed and sold in this 19th-century depiction. Rana Mitter suggests that the west's linguistic dominance had an impact on China



Local resources and technological advances (here, at a Krupp factory in Germany) fuelled western dominance – but other regions are catching up

Margaret MacMillan

“The dramatic effects of the industrial, scientific and technological revolutions meant that western nations were stronger”

The truth is that, in terms of world history, western dominance has been relatively short – and now looks to be coming to an end. Until the end of the 18th century it was not even possible to talk of one part of the world dominating the other. There were important regional powers – France in Europe, China in Asia – but none that could plausibly claim hegemony over the world. Communications were too slow and technology too imperfect for any nation, no matter how powerful, to project its power around the world in any sustained fashion. True, some European powers had far-off colonies, but they had to rely on local forces and alliances with local rulers to maintain them.

Even 200 years ago, the west – if by that we mean the powers of western Europe and then the US – was not significantly richer nor more advanced than the rest of the world: think of the Ottomans, Qing China, the Mughals. Much of North America and sub-Saharan Africa remained beyond the control of western powers. In Asia, Japan and Thailand remained independent.

In the 19th century the west won the edge that it is now losing again. The dramatic effects of the industrial, scientific and technological revolutions meant that, until the rest of the world caught up, western nations had better guns, more productive economies and superior medicine. The first sign that the tide was turning came in 1904–05 when Japan, which had met the western challenge by reforming its society and economy, defeated Russia. Nationalist movements worldwide took heart. Two great wars exhausted the European powers and, in the aftermath of 1945, the empires vanished. True, the US was a superpower, and remains strong, but its margin over the rest of the world – especially in economics – is no longer as great.

So, in terms of human history, the west hasn't dominated for very long. The Roman empire lasted much longer. And in recent decades ideas, techniques, even fashions have been flowing into the west as much as they have the other way. Next time you eat Thai food, listen to music from Africa, use a

phone designed in Japan or drive a car made in Korea, ask yourself: who is dominating whom? 🌐



Margaret MacMillan is a professor of international history at the University of Oxford. Her books include *History's People: Personalities and the Past* (Profile Books, 2016)



Did the Cold War ever really end?

The Cold War is often thought to have died after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. But with relations between Russia and some western nations becoming increasingly frosty, have reports of its demise been exaggerated? Seven historians offer their opinions

Evan Mawdsley

“The Cold War was a product of the 1917 revolution and the Second World War”



Relations between the US and Russian Federation have been cool over the past 10 years, and were chilled further by the 2014 annexation of the Crimea. But those developments are part of a new era. The Cold War meant more than tension between two major states. It evolved over time, but had three essential features. One, a consequence

of the Second World War, was global bipolarity. Many major states had been defeated or weakened, leaving the two ‘super powers’. Washington and Moscow assembled alliance systems, especially Nato and the Warsaw Pact. The second feature was ideology, Marxism-Leninism versus liberal-capitalism (or anti-communism). These idea systems bound each bloc together and impeded good inter-bloc relations. Soviet leaders took socialism seriously: it was a buttress of their bloc, especially in eastern Europe, and it won the USSR significant support among leftist political groups, in Europe and then in the anti-colonial movement. The third feature was massive arms procurement, especially nuclear. Such weapons made military conflict on the scale of the Second World War unthinkable. The ‘war’ was therefore a cold one, carried out through ideology rather than fighting.

The world changed profoundly in all three areas, as a result of the collapse of the USSR. First, the blocs were no more, especially the eastern European alliance system. The Russian Federation now lacks close allies or clients. Similarly, with no serious external threat, the US receives only limited support from its own friends. Meanwhile, Marxism-Leninism ceased to be a powerful ideology. The Russian Federation from time to time puts forward an anti-liberal ideology or talks about ‘Eurasianism’, but neither provides the basis for an international movement. Nuclear weapons still exist; the US and the Russian Federation have far more than other states. But those play little role in their relationship, and the Russian Federation, with a population now half that of the US, can deploy only weak conventional forces. Major states will disagree and compete. But the Cold War was a product of the 1917 Russian Revolution and the Second World War. It is over, and it will not return.

Evan Mawdsley was professor of international history at the University of Glasgow. His books include *World War II: A New History* (CUP, 2009)

Kathleen Burk

“What was notable was that in the 20th century the superpowers forebore actually coming to blows”



Cold War is a term denoting the period between 1945, when the US and UK governments decided that the hostility of the USSR to ‘the west’ was the fundamental factor in international affairs, and 1991, when the end of the USSR signified the victory of the US and its allies.

During this period, the US government frequently saw the hand of the Soviets in any disturbance in any country on the planet, although others were sometimes less convinced, and presumably the USSR assumed the same of the US. The response by both sides was to build alliances all over the world in order to ‘contain’ the enemy, excepting the countries that preferred not to be a member of either, invoking the ‘plague on both your houses’ principle.

What stabilised this period was the atomic standoff, and the eventual acceptance by the leaders of both sides that neither could win a nuclear war, because the only possible outcome for any ‘winner’ was to be less damaged than the other. Public opinion supported this conclusion, and there was no support to utilise these weapons.

Yet how did this Cold War differ from the classical Balance of Power as evidenced throughout humanity’s long history? There were the coalitions of the Peloponnesian War of the fifth century BC; those of virtually every European war, most famously the wars for and against the France of Louis XIV and of Napoleon; the alliance systems of the later 19th century; and those for and against Germany in the 20th century. What was notable in the second half of the 20th century was that the two superpowers forebore actually coming to blows. Those countries that endured proxy wars were apparently of less account.

The question is whether the conflict between the US-led coalition and the Soviet Union/Russia has, since 1991, merely been in abeyance. My own answer is that the Cold War never ended because it was a part of a continuum since the dawn of history. Relative power may differ, but not the diplomatic quadrille, as great and less great powers try to secure safety, and advantage, in the international jungle. Only the name expired.

Kathleen Burk is emeritus professor of modern and contemporary history at University College London, specialising in Anglo-American relations and 20th-century history

Piers Ludlow

“It was a competition between two universalist models: each claimed to represent the future”



The Cold War was always much more than just a military stand-off or armed confrontation between the western and eastern blocs. Instead it was at root the competition between two fundamentally different visions of modernity – of how the world should and would be organised in the future. It was this latter competition that came to a deci-

sive end in the period between 1989 and 1991 when the Soviet bloc collapsed.

This does not of course mean that all that has followed has been about peace and goodwill. There is still plenty of conflict, plenty of division in today's world. Nor is it to deny that a state like Putin's Russia poses a genuine security threat to Europe, especially to neighbouring nations like the Baltic States or the Ukraine. It does. Nor even is it to deny the ongoing competition between western liberal democracy and alternative world views, whether those of Islamic extremists or that of an autocratic and still nominally communist country like China. These do represent very different ways of organising politics, society and economics. History did not come to an end in 1989, as some suggested.

But the Cold War, as I understand it, was a very specific competition between two universalist models, each of which claimed to represent the future for all mankind. I'm not at all sure by contrast that such universalism lies at the heart of Putin's thought or that of China. The Soviet Union and the US both believed the world should and would move decisively in the direction of its economic system, its society, and its political system. And each poured huge energies into the task of trying to ensure this outcome, using every tactic in the book from propaganda and bribery to outright use of military force.

It was this that drove the Cold War and turned it from a traditional great power rivalry into a defining feature of the period between around 1947 and 1991. And it was this competition that ended, decisively, with the victory of the western model. So the Cold War has ended, however divided, insecure and unpredictable our current world remains.

Piers Ludlow is associate professor at the London School of Economics and joint editor of *Visions of the End of the Cold War in Europe, 1945–1990* (Berghahn, 2012)

Vladislav Zubok

“Ironically, populists in the west now tend to see Russia as a potential ally against other challenges”



There have always been those who believed that the Cold War did not really end in 1991. Those people could be met in three key areas: post-Soviet elites in Moscow, in smaller countries along the borders of the Russian Federation, and in Washington, DC. In Moscow, these people were initially on the margins: the military, ex-KGB officials and ideologues of Russian national-

ism. They were inspired by anti-Americanism and a belief that the US would not tolerate a strong, independent Russia.

In the countries bordering the Russian Federation, nationalists who came to power after 1991 believed that Russia would never become a stable liberal democracy. The leaders of those countries opted for a preventive strategy: to join Nato and thereby prevent a possibility of Russia's geopolitical comeback.

Finally, in Washington, Yeltsin's regime of the 1990s was seen by diehard 'Cold Warriors' as a fleeting aberration from the 'eternal Russia': authoritarian, and bent on dominance in Eurasia. Once it regained strength, they argued, it would be again an adversary of the US. These people viewed liberals who argued for the enlargement of Nato as a "zone of peace and democracy" as useful fools who served the right cause.

It was not preordained that these viewpoints would coalesce and become a self-fulfilling prophecy. After Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, commentators claimed that the 'Russian Bear' was back. Reusing mothballed Cold War slogans, they presented it as a threat to the 'free world', with Ukraine the first falling domino paving the way for Russian domination in Eurasia.

Yet it would be a travesty of history to regard Putin's Russia – a regional, authoritarian and corrupt power – as waging the same battles as the Soviet Union. In the new situation, when global liberalism in the US and Europe is checked by internal contradictions, a major realignment may be afoot. Attempts by liberal-centrist media to portray Russia as the main enemy of the international community have failed to ignite a new Cold War because they stretch reality too far. Ironically, rightwing populists in the west now tend to see Russia as a potential ally against other challenges, from radical Islamism to powerful China. This is a totally new ballgame. The Cold War did end in 1989–91 after all. We live in a new, messy world.

Vladislav Zubok is professor of international history at LSE. He is writing a book about the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 'eternal Cold War' →

Hakim Adi

“The bipolar division of the world no longer exists but contention between the big powers continues”



The Cold War might be said to have commenced with Churchill's 1946 Iron Curtain speech, which referred to postwar geopolitical developments in Europe. However, the Anglo-American assault on the Soviet Union and communism, as well as the bipolar division of the world that ensued, had a profound and lasting global impact.

The Cold War had a major impact on Africa and the African diaspora, from the persecution of African-American activist WEB Du Bois to the deportation from the US of communist Claudia Jones. In Africa it was used as justification for the existence of apartheid and the banning of the ANC and other liberal organisations, as well as for Nato's support for the continuation of Portugal's colonial rule. The Cold War created not just conditions for the continued intervention of big powers in Africa but also justifications for such intervention. From the 1940s, major colonial powers demanded that formal political independence could be granted only to 'responsible' leaders – those who would be responsible to the big powers, and opposed to the Soviet Union and communism or to the empowerment of Africa's people. Leaders who didn't meet such requirements were removed: such was the fate of Prime Minister Lumumba of what's now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, replaced by one deemed more suitable – Mobutu Sese Seko.

The bipolar division of the world no longer exists but the contention between the big powers continues in new forms. In Africa a new scramble for geopolitical and economic advantage means intervention is as rife as ever, provided with new justifications. Libyan independence was ended under Nato bombardment, justified on the dubious basis of the 'right to protect'. The status quo is maintained by the diktat of the IMF/World Bank and the African Union's NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa's Development) but challenged by BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) as well as by Africa's long-suffering people. Perhaps the most damaging impact has been ideological, the attempt to deny that there is any alternative. Fortunately history and experience show otherwise – that change is inevitable, and that the people are their own liberators.

Hakim Adi is a professor of history at the University of Chichester and author of *Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora, 1919–1939* (Africa World Press, 2013)

Robert Service

“The US and Russia are some way short of being locked in a struggle for world supremacy”



The Cold War that lasted from the late 1940s until the late 1980s is dead and gone. At several moments, such as the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, a single misjudged step taken by one side or the other could have resulted in nuclear armageddon. For four decades, while the Third World War was avoided, America and the Soviet Union competed

in offering a model of the way in which a 'good society' should be organised. Capitalism and individual civil rights were contrasted with communism and collective welfare. Each superpower strove to bind 'third world' countries into an alliance with it.

When the USSR fell apart in 1991, Russian president Boris Yeltsin strove for his country to become accepted as embracing the values of democracy, economic liberalism and social pluralism. No longer did it offer itself as a model for emulation. Through most of the 1990s Yeltsin battled with the problems of a severe economic depression and a plummeting standard of living for most Russian citizens.

The situation changed when Vladimir Putin succeeded to the presidency in 2000. He announced the launch of a campaign for a strong state and an orderly society. At first he chose friendship with US president George W Bush and helped to enable the America-led invasion of Afghanistan, but when he failed to secure endorsement of his military severity in Chechnya he became sharply hostile to the west. The boost in world market oil and gas prices gave Putin the revenues he needed. He opposed US policy in the Middle East, annexed Crimea and militarily intervened elsewhere in Ukraine. He modernised Russian armaments and thumbed his nose at American presidents.

At this point, there are concerns about the possible renewal of a Cold War. Although Russia is wedded to the capitalist system, it claims to have a better idea than America about how to organise a democracy. Yet Russia and America are some way short of being locked in a comprehensive struggle for world supremacy, and the recent dip in prices for oil and gas makes Russia a less than impressive contender. Not yet a Cold War, then, but a situation of acute danger. Fingers crossed...

Robert Service is the author of several major books on Russian history, including *The Last of the Tsars* (Macmillan, 2017) and *Kremlin Winter: Russia and the Second Coming of Vladimir Putin* (Picador, 2019)



Russian president Vladimir Putin orders military drills in March 2014, shortly after parliament approved the use of Russian troops in Ukraine



French troops during a Nato exercise in Germany in 1961. Nato forces were deemed necessary to deter a perceived communist threat

Catherine Merridale

“From military over-flights to the snatching of Crimea, Russia once again shows no respect at all for global rules”



The Cold War ended finally in December 1991. As the Soviet flag was lowered forever, Mikhail Gorbachev closed the door on his Kremlin office, ceding power to Boris Yeltsin. What Ronald Reagan had once called the “evil empire” was dead.

Shorn of its loyal satellites, Russia was to face a decade of political and economic strife, at times relying on the goodwill of the IMF. Life was almost impossibly difficult for most citizens, but the leaders and the rich did well. A new class of global Russians emerged, acquiring a taste for luxury and turning up in Cyprus, Paris, Kensington and Brooklyn. They stuck together, but their talk was all about interior design and private schools; spies were for fiction and the cinema. Even the Berlin Wall was soon to disappear. That master of the Cold War spy plot, John le Carré, began to set his novels in Kenya and Panama.

More than two decades on, the atmosphere has clearly changed again. From cyber-attacks to polonium poisoning, from military over-flights to the snatching of Crimea, Russia once again shows no respect at all for global rules. Echoes of the past grow louder all the time.

Vladimir Putin was a product of the Cold War KGB, the main security agency for the Soviet Union from 1954 until its break-up in 1991. He remains an advocate of its successor, whose specialities include a range of secret foreign operations (blatant ones are also fine). Meanwhile, like the old Soviet military, Putin’s generals are moving troops around in massive numbers, building bases in the Middle East and arming the old Prussian fortress at Kaliningrad.

It is hard to avoid the terminology of the Cold War, for here is yet another confrontation that includes a direct challenge to democracy. But history is full of examples of doomed generals who could only ever fight the campaigns of their previous wars. We have to see that this is not a rerun of some conflict from the recent past. Politics is not that simple or predictable. Instead, we need to recognise exactly what is going on in our own time. It is the only hope we have of working out what to do next. 🌐

Catherine Merridale is a historian specialising in Russia and has held a series of posts at British universities. Her books include *Lenin on the Train* (Allen Lane, 2016)



Have empires ever been a force for good?

Throughout the course of history, numerous peoples have expanded their territories by subjugating others, creating vassal states or settled colonies. But have any of these empires benefited the inhabitants of the lands they conquered? Seven historians compare the impacts – positive and negative – of different colonising powers around the globe

Yasmin Khan

“The British empire transformed trade and drove the growth of cities. In short, it made the modern world”



Historians are pretty squeamish about the idea of empires as a force for good. That’s because we prefer hard facts that we can find in archives to thrashing out counterfactuals. What would the world have been like without the British empire? It’s an interesting question but not one historians can easily answer.

We can say, though, that the British empire stood against a lot of the things that we now cherish. Take the rule of law, liberal democracy or the education of young children, for example. The ‘rule of law’ was patchy across the empire, and there were different rights for jury trial depending on whether you were white or black. Censorship was rife. Nowhere in Asia or Africa had full democracy under empire until independence, and the money spent on primary education and literacy was pitiful. If you are in favour of racial equality or democracy today, it’s hard to think of the empire as a golden age. Fundamentally, the British empire rested on the idea that some groups of people are simply better than others.

That’s not to say that there weren’t extraordinary people who believed in imperial expansion, or that the imperialists themselves were immoral. There was an astonishing outpouring of creativity in the Victorian age. Like international development projects today (which often do good, but can also backfire and have unintended consequences), imperialists often wanted to do the best for colonised people. The forces driving change – the rise of global industry and capitalism – were bigger than any individual or any one country.

Ultimately, it’s just better history to think in terms of specifics: there were dark moments and there were brighter times. For good or bad, the British empire brought people into contact across the globe, transformed trade and drove forward the growth of cities. In short, it made the modern world – whatever you think of that.

Yasmin Khan is associate professor of history at Kellogg College, University of Oxford, and author of *The Raj at War: A People’s History of India’s Second World War* (Bodley Head, 2015)

Peter Jones

“Those who benefited most from the Athenian ‘empire’ were, Aristotle said, the Athenian poor”



If ‘good’ is defined as ‘material benefits’, perhaps we should ask: “Who benefits?”

The Athenian ‘empire’ of the fifth century BC arose out of fear that the Persians, driven out of Greece in 479 BC, would return. Athens, with its superior navy, was invited to head a Greek coalition that would gather tribute and build triremes (war galleys) to protect the

Aegean from incursions. Over time, Athens turned this alliance into an autocratic ‘empire’ that came to an end when it was comprehensively defeated by Sparta in 404 BC.

Those who most benefited from the ‘empire’ were, Aristotle said, the Athenian poor. Why? Because Athens was a direct democracy: the poor dominated the Assembly and made sure that it worked in their interests. So it was they who were granted the land that Athens confiscated from rebellious states or took over in their ‘colonies’ around the Aegean; they who were paid for public service, for example on juries (a radical innovation); they who held down the jobs working in Athens’ navy and dockyards, which kept the ‘empire’ going. Furthermore, Athens’ political, cultural and intellectual innovations at this time were to imprint themselves across western history. How the rich – the only people who paid taxes – took advantage is less clear, except perhaps in general terms of ‘prestige’.

Rome, by contrast, was an oligarchy, and its leading men kept it that way. They gorged themselves on the profits to be made from the Roman empire throughout the course of its 500-year existence. But those profits could not be made if the empire were permanently in conflict, because armies were expensive. Since experience from their earlier conquest of Italy (in the third century BC) had taught Romans how to bring defeated people on board, much of the empire enjoyed prolonged periods of peace and, therefore, safe internal travel.

The result, intentional or not, was flourishing trade throughout this ‘global’ world, bringing with it wide-ranging economic benefits and a rise in general, especially urban, living standards. The empire became the go-to location. But in the fifth century AD, Germanic invasions broke up its western half. The ensuing collapse of living standards there testified eloquently to the empire’s powerful economic benefits.

Peter Jones is the author of *Vox Populi: Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about the Classical World but Were Afraid to Ask* (Atlantic, 2019)

Elizabeth Graham

“Maya and Aztec rules of engagement in warfare resulted in far fewer deaths than was the case in European warfare”



Empires have never been a force for good. They are built on competition for resources among elites and the exploitation of an underclass. Not only are ‘ends’ said to justify the means, empires also rationalise their actions by claiming access either to supernatural sanctioning or to some higher morality. We are, however, stuck with empires, because societies

with effective curbs against the accumulation of power, and which prohibit the use of violence to safeguard power, cannot survive alongside those that sanction power and aggression.

The pre-Columbian Maya city-states or kingdoms (at their height around AD 250–830) did not form an empire, though their historical trajectory suggests that empire might have resulted had the political power of particular cities and dynasties not been undermined by more ‘global’ regional forces. In that respect, the Maya were not alone in Mesoamerica. Centres of power in different regions waxed and waned, while ruling families maintained trans-regional ties. In the 16th century the Spanish were faced with an Aztec empire that, like the empires in Europe, reflected supra-regional historical trajectories.

Were Maya kingdoms or the Aztec empire any ‘better’ than those of the Old World? There were democratic traditions, as in the city-state of Tlaxcala, and councils always had some say in who would rule the Aztecs; the Maya, however, followed dynastic rule. Contrary to popular belief, Mesoamerican rules of engagement in warfare resulted in far fewer deaths than was the case in European warfare. There were no grazing animals, so disease rates were lower than in the Old World, as well as economic benefits in maintaining forests and trees. Social mobility was limited, but there was a good deal of locomotion. Having no beasts of burden, the upper classes could not monopolise travel, and people walked everywhere.

Commerce was lively, and markets offered an astounding range of goods. Taxes and tribute reflected long-term allegiances to lords rather than territorial boundaries; this, and the fact that kinship ties stretched over long distances, encouraged travel. As empires go, one could do worse.

Elizabeth Graham is professor of Mesoamerican archaeology at University College London Institute of Archaeology

Joachim Whaley

“The subjects of the Holy Roman Empire had more legal rights than those of any other European polity”



“Neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire” – Voltaire’s description of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation has often been cited to underline the worthlessness of this polity that Napoleon destroyed in 1806. Since 1945, though, scholars have been more positive. Some even viewed it as a precursor of the European Union.

Pope Leo III crowned the Frankish king Charlemagne emperor in 800, but the empire’s continuous history began only in 962, when the German kings assumed the imperial crown. Thereafter the empire, under various dynasties – notably, from 1438, the Habsburgs – was essentially German.

The Holy Roman Empire was not expansionist. Indeed, it largely contracted from the late Middle Ages. The Swiss cantons and the northern Netherlands seceded in the 16th century, and France acquired Metz, Toul, Verdun and Alsace in 1648.

Critical accounts of the empire in the 19th and early 20th centuries cited these losses as signs of its inadequacy. They rarely conceded that it had made significant contributions to the development of west-central and central Europe, notably the creation of an enduring system of public order and of law. Successive medieval emperors experimented with internal peace decrees. And around 1500 the empire developed a legal system that pacified the territories and cities of German-speaking Europe. By 1519 it had a supreme court and a regional enforcement system that ended feuding for good. That year Charles V was obliged to sign an electoral capitulation before his coronation, which explicitly guaranteed the rights of all Germans.

These rights were extended by subsequent imperial electoral capitulations and by major peace agreements designed to prevent the outbreak of religious wars. These treaties also secured and extended the rights of individuals, including rights over property as well as provisions designed to ensure that Germans could not suffer discrimination on grounds of their religion. By the 18th century the subjects of the empire had more rights enforceable by courts than those of any other European polity.

Relentless French military campaigns beginning in 1792 led to the dissolution of the empire in 1806. But the sense of a common history over 1,000 years, and the legal traditions established by the empire, have shaped the history of German-speaking Europe ever since.

Joachim Whaley is professor of German history and thought at the University of Cambridge



Chandrika Kaul

“Imperialism is freighted with negative connotations. Yet this is too reductive an approach”



Few major empires in modern history can be said to have been unmitigated disasters. This is no more than stating that any large-scale organisation of control needs to ensure there are winners – at least, for some of the people, for some of the time.

Imperialism is freighted with negative connotations of intrinsic and systemic inequality and exploitation. Yet this is too reductive an approach, especially when examining the track record of the British in India. Instead, we must consider the political culture of imperialism, both subversive and supportive, evaluate relative gain and loss, and assert the significance of context as key to assessing intention and impact.

After independence Indians borrowed 250 articles from the Government of India Act (1935) for their new constitution, and chose to run their army, railways, press, broadcasting, judiciary and parliamentary system substantively on British lines. Prominent nationalist leaders extolled the virtues of British imperialism. Such sentiments affirming the apparent British ‘genius for colonisation’ do not marginalise the economic exploitation, racism and violence that resulted from British rule, but they do underline the need for a nuanced approach.

The British claimed they were committed to inculcating representative institutions and a liberal culture, making colonial rule synonymous with modernisation and progress. This implies a clear-sighted policy, implemented in a systematic fashion by absolute rulers. In fact, imperial ideology was ambiguous and policy inconsistent. Indian princes controlled 40% of the subcontinent, and even within British India their rule was characterised by ‘dominance without hegemony’.

The spread of new technology to India, and its impact, was often more complex than we might think. Traditional boatmen survived and flourished, despite British efforts to champion steamboats. Railways served imperial economic and strategic imperatives, but their proliferation also benefited Indians.

The Raj exploited traditional fissures between castes and religions. Yet other, arguably more profound chasms that bedevilled India, such as ‘untouchability’, were of indigenous origin. The British introduced cricket, hoping that matches between the races would consolidate the empire – but almost from the outset they were to be defeated at their own game.

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Jon Wilson

“The British ‘empire’ was so disparate, so sprawling, that it has never been possible to think about the whole coherently”



Was empire a force for good or bad? Have empires really any kind of force at all? Take the British empire. Despite the claims of a few self-appointed ideologues, it was never anything other than a sprawling collection of different territories, each connected to Britain in a different way. There was no imperial system, no single imperial regime.

The British presence meant different things for different people because it worked in different ways. In India, Britain governed despotically from the late 1700s to 1947. British rule impoverished a subcontinent, turning one of the most prosperous societies on the globe into one of the world’s poorest. In Canada – to take another example – life for native Americans became harder. But a massive, underpopulated expanse of territory became breadbasket to the world, as British rule created vibrant self-governing institutions. European migrants attracted to British territories in North America built one of the richest societies in the world.

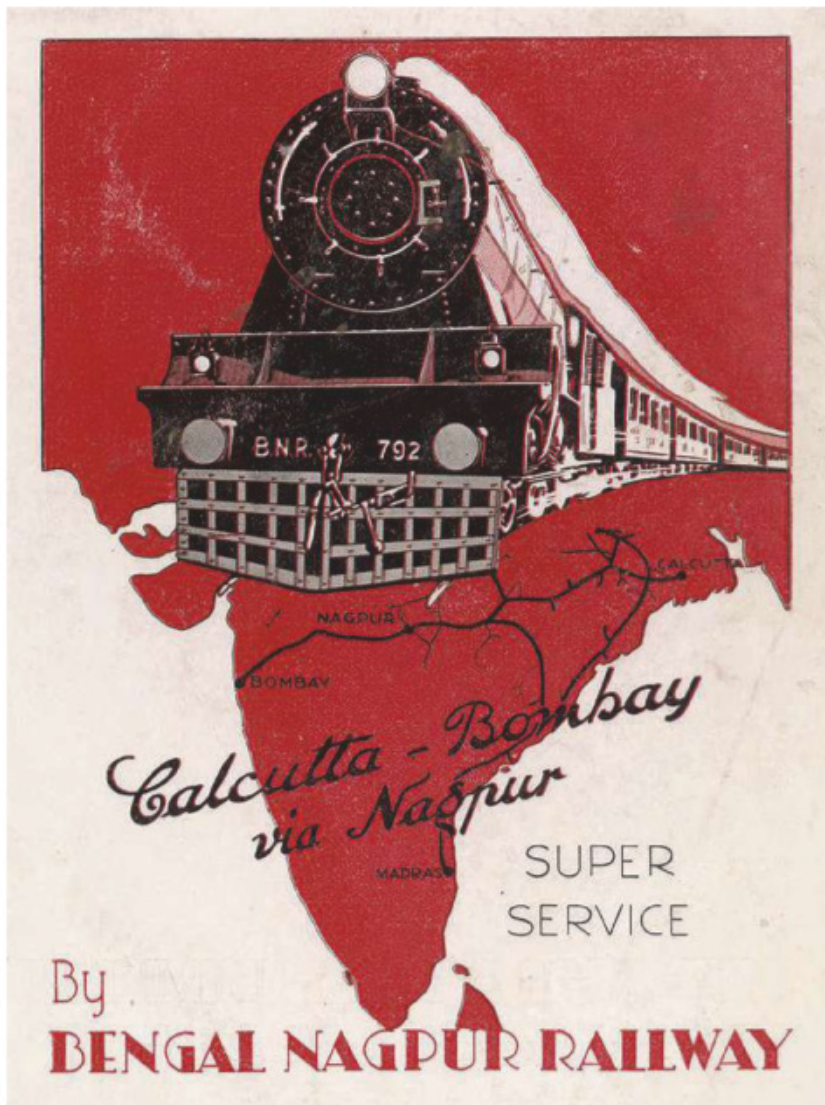
‘The empire’ was so disparate, so sprawling, that it has never been possible to think about the whole coherently. Britons have emphasised the importance of different parts of it at different points in time. Today, we tend to think of India, Africa and the Caribbean. But in British school textbooks of the 1950s, ‘empire’ mainly meant Canada, Australia and New Zealand, the ex-colonies that were then Britain’s greatest export market.

Of course, there have been many imperial ideologues trying to persuade us their vision of empire is a ‘good thing’; people always try to create coherent stories. But every vision of empire that presents it as a united force leaves out some parts. JR Seeley, author of the most famous defence of empire, *The Expansion of England* (1883), went so far as to declare that India couldn’t really be considered part of the empire at all. Seeley argued that empire needed to be celebrated as a force of liberalism and progress – but that argument was based on his exclusion of Britain’s largest possession. In reality, the history of empire is far more chaotic and messy than its defenders like to think.

Jon Wilson is professor of modern history at King’s College London and the author of *India Conquered: Britain’s Raj and the Chaos of Empire* (Simon and Schuster, 2016)



Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec emperor, is captured by conquistador Hernán Cortés in 1521. The Spanish later launched “forceful campaigns of evangelisation aiming to eliminate native religions”, says Francois Soyer



An advert promoting the Bengal Nagpur railway, 1935. “The railways served imperial economic and strategic imperatives, but their proliferation also benefited Indians,” suggests Chandrika Kaul

Francois Soyer

“The Spanish brutally subjugated the indigenous peoples of the Americas”



The Spanish empire, which was established in the decades following 1492 and lasted until the 19th century, has become infamous for its negative impact on conquered populations. Acting in the name of the Spanish crown, ruthless adventurers exploited their military advantages (horses, steel weapons and guns) and indigenous divisions to brutally usurp and subjugate the populations of Mesoamerica and South America.

Post-conquest, the Spanish crown established the *encomienda* (‘trusteeship’) system, by which it kept control of the land but granted Spanish settlers the right to exploit indigenous labour along with the duty to oversee the Christianisation of their native charges. This was a system open to egregious abuse – settlers focused on their personal enrichment through the forced labour of natives – and it was controversial even among contemporaries. The crown later instituted a *repartimiento* (‘partition’) system that essentially took over the management of the indigenous workforce, ensuring a ready supply of conscripted native labour for the empire’s silver mines and large agricultural estates.

Europeans unwittingly introduced virulent diseases such as smallpox that killed millions, devastating native populations in the Caribbean and on the continents. To replace the declining indigenous peoples, disease-resistant African slaves were imported, thus initiating the horrific Atlantic slave trade.

Finally, the gradual establishment of the Catholic church led to forceful campaigns of evangelisation aiming to eliminate native religions and acculturate indigenous peoples. In the Yucatán region of Central America, the process was particularly brutal, amounting to a co-ordinated attempt to wipe out Maya culture.

Like all colonial empires, the primary purpose of the Spanish empire was to enrich the mother state in Europe. Overall, there can be no doubt that the rise of the Spanish empire had a dramatically negative impact on the indigenous peoples of the Americas, though it has also thereby decisively shaped the culture and faith of most modern-day Latin Americans. Its notoriety was widely decried by early modern Protestant propagandists who had an anti-Spanish and anti-Catholic agenda. Furthermore, apologists of later northern European colonial powers, notably Britain and France, also sought to whitewash the excesses of their own colonial endeavours by contrasting Spanish colonialism with their own ‘enlightened’ colonialism. 🌐

Francois Soyer is a senior lecturer in late medieval and early modern history at the University of New England in Armidale, Australia



Did the Age of Exploration bring more harm than good?

From the 15th century, European navigators sailed in search of new routes, lands and opportunities for trade and exploitation, spreading and gaining knowledge, and transforming the lives of peoples they encountered. Here, six historians debate whether we should celebrate or condemn these trailblazers



Margaret Small

“The Age of Exploration paved the way for the globalised economies we see today”



For the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas, the potential benefits of contact with other peoples were far outweighed by the brutality of European conquest and colonisation, and the ravages of European diseases that cut a swathe through the populations. The experiences of the Taino of Hispaniola and the Beothuk of Newfoundland painfully demon-

strate the harm brought about by the Age of Exploration: both were among the peoples the Europeans first encountered in the Americas, and both are now extinct. We have yet to even fully understand what was lost in this devastation. This era also saw large-scale European involvement in the slave trade. By 1820, it's thought that more than 10 million west Africans had found themselves unwilling slaves in the Americas. Their own societies were destabilised and depopulated. For them, the Age of Exploration undoubtedly brought more harm than good.

For many Europeans, the answer was more often favourable. Europe was able to establish vast trading companies that frequently tapped into local trade systems and created a global commodities network. Conquest and colonisation drew wealth and power into the European sphere, allowing that region to assume a position of global dominance. In the process, Europe became richer than it had ever been before. Even some of the flora and fauna exchanged proved hugely profitable for Europe. Though the potato later became associated with the catastrophic Irish famine in the 1840s, the introduction of that one crop alone helped Europe sustain a huge labour force in the face of a massive population growth in the 18th century.

Considering the issue from a global perspective rather than a regional one, it becomes more of a philosophical question. The Age of Exploration provided opportunities for societies and cultures to interact; it brought all parts of the world into contact with each other, paving the way for the globalised economies we see today; it enabled a knowledge network to extend across the whole globe. In a sense, our modern world is built on the back of the changes introduced by the European Age of Exploration – so it becomes a question of judgement on the modern world.

Margaret Small is lecturer in Europe and the wider world at the University of Birmingham, with a focus on European exploration and colonisation in the 16th century

François Soyer

“The Portuguese took the decisive first steps in the creation of a lasting European stranglehold on world trade”



As the first monarchy to send explorers beyond the geographical limits of Europe, Portugal can claim the title of initiator of the so-called Age of Exploration. From 1415, Portuguese merchants and mariners explored the coasts of western Africa, reaching the Cape of Good Hope in the 1480s. Seeking to establish direct trade links with Asia, in 1497 a fleet under

the command of Vasco da Gama sailed around the Cape to India, followed by yearly expeditions. From 1497 to 1510, the Portuguese established supremacy in the Indian Ocean, in the face of stiff opposition from Muslim and Hindu rivals. In 1500, the expedition of Pedro Álvares Cabral was blown off course on its way to India and reached the shores of Brazil.

The impact of the Portuguese Age of Discovery on modern world history cannot be overstated. On an economic level, it initiated a revolution in world trade. Spices and other Asian goods that had previously transited to Europe via the Islamic world were now directly imported by Portuguese (and later by Dutch and British) ships. To this was later added the lucrative flow of sugar and diamonds from Brazil.

The Portuguese thus took the decisive first steps in the creation of a lasting European stranglehold on world trade. In turn, this ensured European economic prosperity and global political hegemony until the 20th century. But the human toll was very heavy. The Portuguese position in Asia was precarious and dependent upon the calculated use of military force and violence against competitors – for example, the slaughter of the Muslim population of Goa. Most importantly, the Portuguese initiated the transatlantic slave trade. The Portuguese and other Europeans oversaw the forced removal of millions of west Africans, and their dispatch to the mines and fields of the Americas – men and women whose blood, sweat and lives contributed to the enrichment of European empires.

In the end, the answer to the question of whether the era brought more harm than good depends on whether we approach it from the perspective of the self-proclaimed European explorers or the peoples (Asian, African and American) with whom they came into contact.

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A portrait of Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama, who in 1497 pioneered a maritime route from Europe to India. “The impact of the Portuguese Age of Discovery on world history cannot be overstated,” says François Soyer



A 17th-century illustration shows European sailors trading with Beothuk men in the region that became Newfoundland. The Beothuk, among the first peoples of the Americas encountered by Europeans, no longer exist

Graciela Iglesias-Rogers

“Exploring entails entanglements of all sorts; some are desirable, others not”



In early February this year, scientists announced the discovery of a vast hidden network of towns, farms and highways beneath the trees of a remote Guatemalan jungle. The finding suggests that about 1,200 years ago the region supported a Maya population of up to 20 million people – roughly equivalent to half of Europe’s population at the time. A game-

changer for archaeologists, this breakthrough highlights a weakness in the set question: there is no such thing as an ‘Age of Exploration’. It is inherent in human nature to look out into the unknown. This discovery underlines the fact that we have been exploring since time began: the earliest inhabitants of the Americas did it, expanding their territories; the Spanish Conquistadors and later adventurers did it; and humans will continue doing it in the future.

Archaeologists had assumed that Maya cities were isolated and self-sufficient; now it seems that a far more complex, interconnected society flourished. Yet this discovery owes much to the pioneering scientific expeditions of Ramón Ordóñez (1773), José Antonio Calderón (1784), Antonio del Río (1786), Alexander von Humboldt (1803–04), José Luciano Castañeda (1805–07) and, crucially, Juan Galindo (1831–34). Galindo was no great scientist; the Dublin-born son of an English actor, he set off for the Americas to volunteer in the Latin American wars of independence, and became governor of the Guatemalan department of Petén. Uniquely positioned to navigate through the Hispanic-Anglosphere, his greatest contribution consisted of vivid accounts of Maya ruins, published in London and New York. His reports captured the imaginations of many people, including John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood who, between 1839 and 1842, followed his trail to become founders of Classic Maya studies.

Exploring entails entanglements of all sorts; some are desirable, others not. The latest discovery adds credibility to the theory that societal dynamics linked to the depletion of natural resources explain the collapse of the Classic Maya around AD 900. Laser pulse technology, instead of machetes, allowed the stripping away of tree canopy from aerial images to reveal the ancient civilisation underneath, thus proving that exploration and natural and heritage preservation can be compatible activities.

Graciela Iglesias-Rogers is senior lecturer in modern European and global Hispanic history at the University of Winchester

Emma Reisz

“Disease was largely an accidental means of conquest – but was devastating in its effects”



During the Age of Exploration, Europeans connected the world into a single navigational system, triggering an era of imperial competition as European states expanded across the globe through trade, colonisation and coercion. This produced many of the global interconnections that underpin the modern world – but these were established at a

vast human cost, paid by some populations and not others.

Benefits such as access to new foods and luxuries, and to new scientific knowledge, accrued disproportionately (but not exclusively) to Europeans. Conversely, the harms were mostly experienced by the rest of the world. The slave trade was the most egregious example, enriching Europe and its colonists through the suffering of Africans. Disease was largely an accidental means of conquest but was devastating in its effects, as infections endemic to the Old World ravaged populations in the Americas and Australasia.

It was not certain at the start of the 15th century that Europeans would dominate global maritime networks. The expeditions of Chinese admiral Zheng He along the rim of the Indian Ocean (1405–33) had much in common with those of Henry the Navigator on the other side of Afro-Eurasia. When Vasco da Gama arrived in east Africa in 1498, his sailors were mistaken by the locals for Chinese. By the mid-15th century, though, the Ming court had abandoned maritime expansion, and Chinese proto-colonialism around the Indian Ocean ended. Zheng He's expeditions had comparatively little impact on world history, whereas the maritime route from Europe to India that da Gama established transformed global trade.

Had early globalisation been Sino-European rather than solely European, the ratio of harms to benefits might have been no more equitable for the rest of the world, however. In 1411, Ming forces overthrew the Kotte king in Sri Lanka, and in a c1431–33 inscription Zheng He boasted that “the countries beyond the horizon and from the ends of the earth have all become [Chinese] subjects”. Europeans were not unique in seeking to profit from maritime expansion – though in the early modern world they were uniquely successful in doing so.

Emma Reisz is lecturer in history at Queen's University Belfast

Glyn Williams

“Pacific islanders adopted new ideas and techniques from European explorers”



The second Age of Exploration, extending over the long 18th century, was most notable for Europe's expansion into the Pacific – or, as Alan Moorehead saw it in his influential 1967 book *The Fatal Impact*, Europe's ‘invasion’ of the vast ocean and its 25,000 islands.

Following the voyages of Cook and his contemporaries in the second half of the 18th century, Tahiti became the geographical and emotional centre of Polynesia, praised by the French explorer Louis-Antoine de Bougainville as “the happy island of Cythera... the true Utopia”. In time, these idyllic impressions were modified as evidence was found throughout the Pacific of human sacrifice, infanticide and cannibalism, and by the end of the century few argued that the islands should be left untouched by European contact. This came at a cost: the lives of the inhabitants of the Pacific, from Hawaii in the north to New Zealand in the south, were disrupted by the uncontrolled activities of whalers, traders and beachcombers, themselves often the rejects of society. They used the islands for victualing and refitting, using as payment the lethal combination of firearms and liquor. The only protective influence came from missionaries – but their presence, too, had a profound effect on the islands' traditional societies.

This ‘fatal impact’ thesis has remained compelling, but in recent decades its conclusions have been challenged by scholars – anthropologists as well as historians – working with local rather than European sources. Islanders gradually came to be seen not as helpless victims of technologically superior newcomers but as participants in a process of mutual exploitation. This collaboration was seen most clearly in the emergence of three island kingdoms: Tahiti (ruled by Pomare), Hawaii (ruled by Kamehameha) and Tonga (ruled by Taufa'ahau). The details of how these centralised kingdoms emerged differ, but each of these rulers used European alliances to strengthen his position. More generally, islanders adopted new ideas and techniques; in renowned New Zealand historian Kerry Howe's words, they “proved adaptable, resourceful, and resilient”. The arrival of Europeans marked a turning point in Pacific history but, despite population losses from disease and warfare, it did not have in the long term the catastrophic impact once suggested.

Glyn Williams is emeritus professor of history at the University of London, and author of books including *Naturalists at Sea: Scientific Travellers from Dampier to Darwin* (Yale, 2013)



A painting of whalers in the South Seas, c1825. After the arrival of Europeans, “the lives of the inhabitants of the Pacific were disrupted by the activities of whalers, traders and beachcombers,” says Glyn Williams



A Chinese woman spins silk in a Song-dynasty painting. That nation’s technological advances that predate Columbus tend to be ignored by historical narratives highlighting the European ‘Age of Exploration’

Julia McClure

“The idea of the ‘Age of Exploration’ whitewashes history, giving a more noble and scholarly appearance to an age of imperialism”



This is a trick question. It embeds European explorers between the 15th and 17th centuries in a noble narrative of discovery, giving the false impression that they travelled beyond their localities for the expansion of human knowledge.

Columbus’s ‘discovery’ of America in 1492 is often taken as the starting point for the so-called ‘Age of Exploration’ – a point

of departure that signposts four ideological problems. First, taking 1492 as a threshold contributes to the Eurocentric project of modernity that, among other things, overlooks the intellectual vibrancy and transcultural exchanges of the global Middle Ages, from the technological advances of Song-dynasty China to the golden age of Islamic science. Second, the Columbus expedition was not motivated by the expansion of knowledge but by the acquisition of resources – and when the hoped-for riches did not materialise, Conquistadors looked to the people and the natural resources of the Americas as a source of wealth.

Third, the ‘discovery’ of the ‘New World’ did not mark an epistemological rupture; Columbus went to his grave quite unaware that he had stumbled upon a new continent. Many of the ‘explorers’ who followed in his footsteps did not discover something new but, rather, encountered fragmented versions of themselves, their desires and ambitions. The nomenclature of the Americas betrays how late-medieval imaginations ordered the New World: for example, the Amazon took its name from Greek mythology. Finally, the ‘Age of Exploration’ construct has prioritised European perspectives and knowledge. What of the Amerindians looking back at the Europeans exploring their world? Many aspects of their histories have yet to be told.

The idea of the ‘Age of Exploration’ does more harm than good, because it whitewashes history, giving a more noble and scholarly appearance to what was actually an age of imperialism. Europeans may have increased their knowledge of the flora, fauna, and topographies of the world in this period, but they often did so at the expense of indigenous knowledge and value systems. Whatever the orientations of new histories of global knowledge, we must never overlook the critical relationship between knowledge and power. 🌐

Julia McClure is lecturer in history at the University of Glasgow, and author of *The Franciscan Invention of the New World* (Palgrave, 2016)

Have nuclear weapons helped to maintain global peace?

Though national and regional conflicts and international terrorism remain rife, since 1945 the world has not been subjected to truly pan-regional or trans-continental war. Over the following pages **four experts in international security** debate the role nuclear arsenals may have played in curbing large-scale conflict



THE PANEL



Malcolm Craig

is senior lecturer in American history at Liverpool John Moores University, specialising in post-1945 US and UK foreign policy



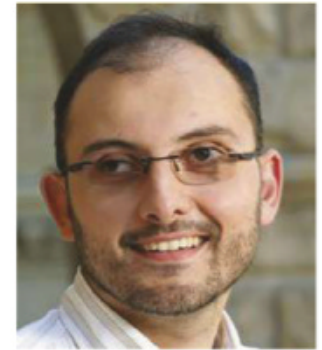
Michael Goodman

is professor of intelligence and international affairs in the department of war studies at King's College London



Simon J Moody

is lecturer in defence studies at King's College London, specialising in the history of strategic thought



Benoît Pelopidas

is professor, junior chair of excellence in security studies, and scientific director of the masters programme in international security at Sciences Po (Paris)

① Able Archer 83 incident

A Nato exercise simulating a conflict escalation, codenamed Able Archer, was conducted in western Europe in November 1983. Fearing that the exercise might be a ruse to mask an actual nuclear strike, the Soviet Union readied its forces in preparation for retaliatory nuclear action – a very real threat that, thankfully, receded at the end of the exercise.

When have nuclear weapons come closest to destabilising world peace – and how close to the brink of nuclear war did the world come?

Benoît Pelopidas: “How close was it?” is a misleading question if asked alone. One also needs to ask: how controllable was it? Indeed, some proponents of nuclear deterrence claim that you need to get close enough to the ‘nuclear abyss’ for the deterrent effect to kick in. But is that true? And can we control how close we get?

A critical moment commonly cited in this regard was the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 [see box, opposite]. And that was not fully controllable: the caution of Soviet premier Khrushchev and US president Kennedy alone cannot explain its peaceful outcome, given the limits of their control over their nuclear arsenals, the limits of safety of the weapons, and other factors. The evidence shows we have been lucky. Though the scholarly and policy worlds pay lip service to this finding, they still do not act and plan as if they take it seriously.

Secrecy means that we know very little about cases of near use of nuclear weapons. It's very likely we overestimate how safe we have been.

Malcolm Craig: There are a number of other examples of times when this has happened. For example, during the first year of the Korean War (1950–53), President Harry Truman's bluster and outbursts from General Douglas MacArthur

provoked international fears about perceived American willingness to use atomic weapons.

Perhaps the most interesting example was the November 1983 Able Archer incident ①, in which a Nato communications exercise was perceived by some in Moscow as preparation for an actual offensive. In this case, nuclear weapons, paranoia and faulty intelligence-gathering *could* have (a big ‘could have’) led to nuclear war.

Simon J Moody: In my judgement, the closest nuclear weapons have come to destabilising world peace was during the first decade of the Cold War, from the late 1940s, when the United States had nuclear superiority. If decision-makers had heeded the arguments for nuclear release – to support outnumbered UN forces during the Korean War, or to help relieve the beleaguered French garrison at Dien Bien Phu ② in Vietnam in 1954 – then today's situation, in which the non-use of nuclear weapons is seen as normal, might never have been established. It is the taboo nature of nuclear weapons use that helps to stabilise weapons of such appalling power within an anarchic international system.

Conversely, how important a factor have nuclear weapons been in preserving world peace, and how have they done so?

BP: If you mean how important a factor have nuclear weapons been in preventing a great power

IN CONTEXT

The Cuban Missile Crisis



Following the failed CIA-backed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961, Fidel Castro made a secret agreement with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev to install strategic nuclear weapons on the island. Much of the US would then be within effective range of Soviet nuclear missiles.

On 14 October 1962, an American U-2 spyplane captured photos indicating the presence of ballistic missiles in western Cuba – in contravention of promises made by Khrushchev to US president John F Kennedy. The US responded by establishing a naval ‘quarantine’, blocking the delivery of further offensive weapons. Khrushchev called this action “outright piracy”, warning that it could lead to war.

Tensions rose over the following two weeks. Both US and Soviet nuclear forces were readied, and Castro’s communications with Khrushchev seemed to urge a Soviet nuclear strike on the US in the event of another invasion of Cuba. A number of incidents could have sparked the launch of nuclear weapons – most notably when the US Navy dropped depth charges on Soviet submarine B-59 near Cuba; a retaliatory strike with nuclear torpedoes was vetoed by only one submarine officer, Vasili Arkhipov.

Secret exchanges between Kennedy and Khrushchev finally resulted in an agreement on 28 October: the US would remove its Jupiter missiles from Italy and Turkey (from where the Soviet Union was in range), and in return the Soviets would remove their offensive weapons from Cuba. Nuclear war – which seemed possible or even likely – had been averted.

conflict or nuclear war, deterrence theory claims that the destructive capability of nuclear weapons triggers fear, which in turn makes leaders cautious. However, recent scholarship shows that this relationship is far from automatic; classic works have also shown that threats intended to deter may have adverse effects, as can any other public policy. If one needs to constantly establish the credibility of a deterrent threat based on nuclear weapons, this will obviously lead to more risk-taking. The question then is: what are the other effects of nuclear weapons in the world beyond security issues? How do nuclear weapons programmes affect the governments and states that build them?

MC: Returning to the Cuban Missile Crisis, though nuclear weapons were a fundamental part of why it occurred, they also played a major role in bringing it to a peaceful conclusion. The thought of global nuclear war caused both leaders to pull back from the brink and achieve a negotiated solution.

Michael Goodman: A certain view of proliferation holds that peace is best achieved through a parity in weapons – in other words, the best means of ensuring peace has been for both sides of a conflict to have a nuclear capability. There is certainly some credence to this: just consider two big nuclear-tipped conflicts or confrontations – the Cold War and India-Pakistan tensions. Arguably, the fear of either a nuclear pre-emptive strike, or the guarantee of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), has been enough to ensure that in those scenarios (relative) peace has been preserved.

What other factors have been more important in maintaining peace?

BP: Given that nuclear war or nuclear weapons use would be unacceptable by most constituencies, factors that have been necessary to prevent nuclear weapons use even once are crucial. We now know that in 1961, two 4-megaton thermonuclear weapons fell from a US B-52 plane over Goldsboro, North Carolina; the only thing that prevented one of these weapons from exploding was a safety switch that remained in the safe position. However, that switch malfunctioned several times in other instances. So the only thing that



② Dien Bien Phu

Site of the decisive battle in the First Indochina War. Defeat of French forces by nationalist-communist Viet Minh troops on 7 May 1954 augured the end of nearly a century of colonial rule in Vietnam. The US had supplied materiel to the French, but plans to deploy US nuclear weapons against the Viet Minh were not enacted.

prevented a 4-megaton nuclear detonation on that day was the random non-simultaneity of the failure of the plane and that of the switch. There is no other name for this than luck. Beyond that, the notion of deterrence, which describes the intended effect of a policy, gives the impression that this intended effect is an actual effect. And nuclear weapons discourse has created the impression that deterrence in terms of war prevention can be achieved only with nuclear weapons. Once those discursive effects are undone, the other factors in maintaining peace reappear, including the absence of desire to attack, and sensitivity to the security dilemma of the other.

MC: Two factors (there are many others) are the destructiveness of major 20th-century wars, and luck. Even before the atomic age, there was considerable international concern that major interstate wars were becoming so destructive as to be untenable. The First and, most significantly, Second World Wars proved this point.

Returning to Cuba, luck – in the sense of the right person making the right decision at the right time – played a significant role in global nuclear war being averted. Soviet submarine officer Vasili Arkhipov *could* have agreed to the firing of a nuclear torpedo at US warships. US fighter pilots *could* have launched nuclear-tipped rockets at their Soviet counterparts. Sometimes, luck really is a factor.

MG: One of the great Cold War lessons was that it was not enough to have a nuclear capability – it was just as important to have knowledge and understanding of your adversary's arsenal. The key lay with intelligence: gauging your opponent's political intentions and military capabilities was tremendously important. With the exception of the Cuban Missile and Able Archer crises, at no point did the intelligence service of one side predict the other was about to launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike – and even in these two cases it was a political concern rather than an intelligence one that led to the worry. In other words, maintaining a nuclear arsenal to react, and an offensive intelligence agency to monitor, were part and parcel of maintaining peace.

SJM: International organisations such as the UN have played an important role in the maintenance of world peace. Although critics have questioned

the effectiveness of bodies such as the Security Council to enforce its resolutions, in lieu of a world policeman the UN continues to legitimise the actions of its members and is probably the best structure we have for maintaining basic human rights. In addition, most forms of political, economic and cultural integration help to maintain the international order. The EU, for example, emerged out of various postwar experiments to regulate the industrial economies of western Europe, and has thus rendered the prospect of war between European nations economically illogical and politically absurd.

How important is the balance of nuclear weapons between different powers?

BP: The two major military powers of the Cold War (the US and Soviet Union) were the first two to develop nuclear weapons, building 70,000 of them. That suggests that, at least for a time, possession of nuclear weapons in large numbers was a crucial feature of world power. However, those two countries possessed many other features of power. Also, Japan, Germany, South Korea and South Africa have explicitly built their strategy of emergence on the international stage on renunciation of nuclear weapons.

Members of groups such as the G7 to G20 [representatives from the banks and governments of the world's leading economic nations] have increasingly included non-nuclear-armed states, and emerging states have rarely sought to acquire those weapons. It's notable that India failed to acquire the status of permanent member of the UN Security Council after its nuclear weapons tests. Nuclear-weapon states have been attacked and lost wars against non-nuclear-weapon states (the US in Vietnam, for example, and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan). So nuclear superiority has not been sufficient to guarantee either victory or war prevention. The record of coercion based on nuclear superiority is very limited. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, nuclear weapons use was avoided through luck. In that crucial case, nuclear balance was simply irrelevant.

MC: As with any historical issue, contingency and context are all. Up to the launch of Sputnik ③ in 1957, the Soviet Union could not – in any meaningful sense – wage nuclear warfare against the US. In that case, the number of weapons



③ Sputnik

The launch of the first artificial satellite, Sputnik 1, by the Soviet Union on 4 October 1957 signalled the start of the 'space race' between the US and USSR. The R-7 rocket that took Sputnik into orbit was originally developed to carry a nuclear warhead.

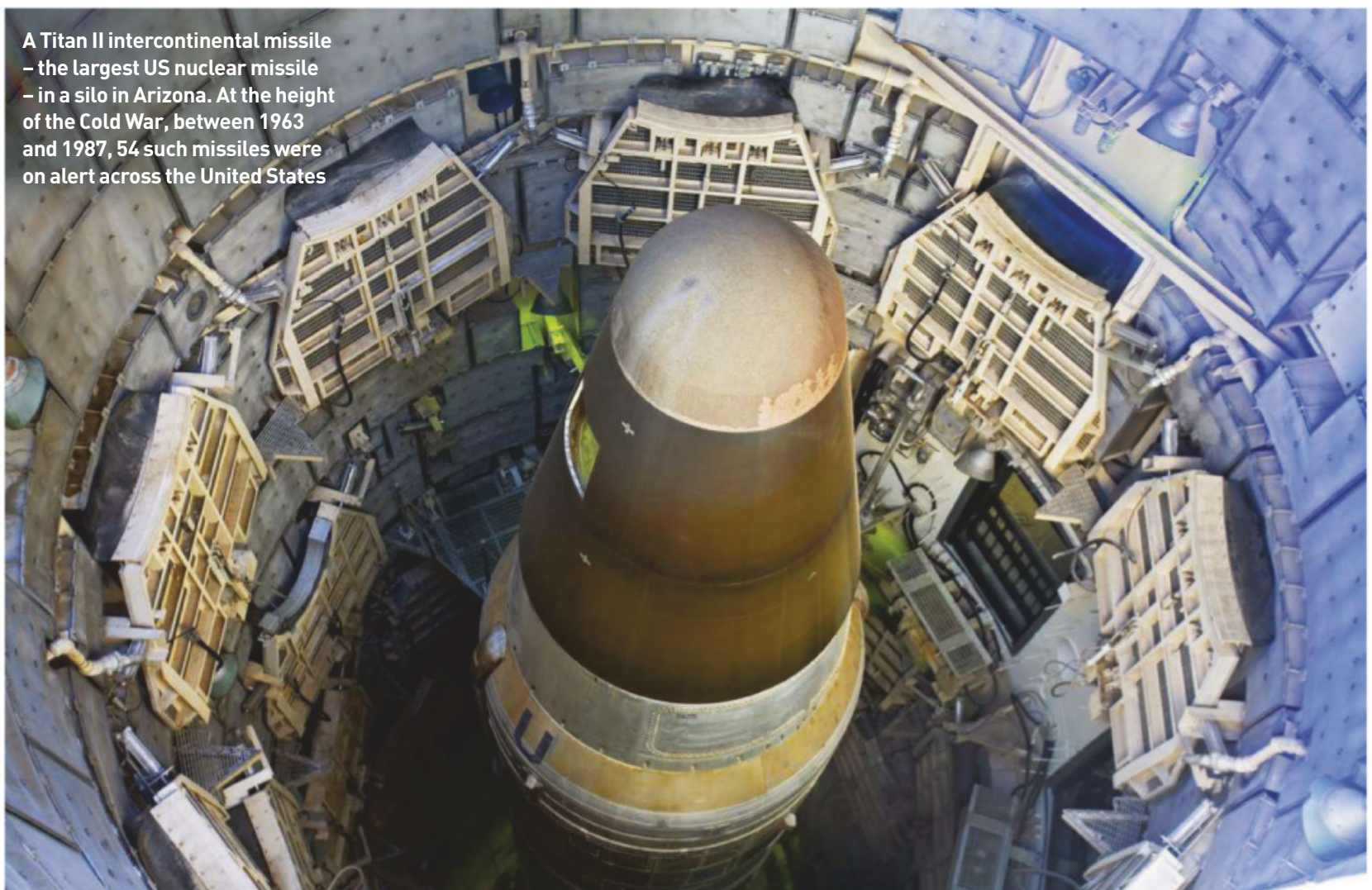


Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev (left) and US president John F Kennedy discuss nuclear proliferation in Vienna in June 1961

“In the Cuban Missile Crisis, nuclear weapons use was avoided through luck. Nuclear balance was irrelevant”

BENOÎT PELOPIDAS

A Titan II intercontinental missile – the largest US nuclear missile – in a silo in Arizona. At the height of the Cold War, between 1963 and 1987, 54 such missiles were on alert across the United States



“Do nuclear weapons deter potential enemies? Britain’s nuclear status did little to deter Argentina in 1982”

MALCOLM CRAIG



West German foreign minister Willy Brandt proposes a global treaty banning aggression using nuclear or other weapons at a conference in September 1968

mattered less than the ability to deliver them.

By the 1970s, both sides had massive arsenals based on missile technologies that could target anywhere in the world. At that point, the number and sophistication of weapons mattered, in a very general sense.

But in some cases, nuclear capability matters not a jot. British governments have been heavily invested in the idea of a nuclear weapon state, but do those weapons deter potential enemies? Britain's nuclear status did little to deter Argentina in 1982. Likewise, Al-Qaeda wasn't deterred by the vast US nuclear arsenal. This leads to another question: what purpose do nuclear weapons serve in the 21st century?

MG: The science and technology of nuclear weapons is such that a vast array of constructions is possible. These range from early atomic devices tested in the 1940s and 1950s (and replicated to an extent by the early devices of most nuclear states), to the advanced and fantastically destructive thermonuclear weapons of the 1950s and onwards. Yet as the explosive yield has varied, so too has the means of delivery: the early devices were dropped from planes, with delivery then progressing to missiles and the miniaturisation of the so-called suitcase bomb ④. Accompanying this technological change is the sheer scale of nuclear arsenals – yet there comes a point, defined as 'nuclear sufficiency' by the British Ministry of Defence in the 1950s, when your opponent has enough weapons to produce any variable of these. At that point, size no longer matters because your destruction is guaranteed.

SJM: The relative balance of nuclear power is essential to the logic of strategic nuclear deterrence. The security paradigm of the Cold War remained so stable because of the paradox of Mutually Assured Destruction – the state whereby opposing nuclear powers each possess the means to launch a decisive nuclear attack against the other, even after absorbing a first nuclear strike itself. By threatening to unleash on a decisive scale the very process it seeks to avoid – war – MAD ensures that the consequences of a strategic nuclear exchange are sufficiently terrifying to convince a would-be aggressor that the costs of war outweigh the benefits.

Has the aspiration of non-nuclear powers to gain nuclear weapons been a destabilising factor around the world?

BP: The spread of nuclear weapons is dangerous. It increases the risk of nuclear detonations, either deliberate or accidental, by state and possibly non-state actors. But, once again, to fully answer your question one would need to know what the development of nuclear weapons programmes does to the governance of a polity. A research programme addressing this very issue is starting.

The assumption of the inevitability of a desire to acquire nuclear weapons has also been very destabilising. It has justified non-proliferation policies, including violent ones, neglecting the fact that most states never had any interest in developing such weapons, and that, among the few who did, most gave up before crossing the nuclear threshold.

In other words, giving up nuclear weapons ambitions is not only the result of an absence of capabilities (think Sweden), the presence of the weapons of a protector (think South Africa) or the success of the use of force (think Iraq in the 1980s or Libya after 1986). Ignoring or denying the clear reasoning for such non-nuclear security strategies may embolden those who argue nuclear weapons are necessary or helpful for maintaining security.

MC: One of the remarkable things about nuclear proliferation is that, despite consistently alarmist assessments of 'tipping points' and 'cascades', few countries have chosen to attain full nuclear capability. Nations such as Argentina, Sweden and South Korea all had at least partial nuclear programmes at some point since the 1950s, but chose to abandon their ambitions. There were many reasons: internal politics, outside influence, leaders' psychology, and so on. In some ways this tells us that the reasons *not* to go for full nuclearisation are more popular than the reasons to do so.

However, nuclear weapons are an issue in the tension between India and Pakistan. Pakistan has 'the bomb' as a fundamental part of its strategy in the event of major war with India. Any potential battlefield use of tactical nuclear weapons could escalate a conflict to the strategic nuclear scale, with horrific regional and global consequences.

SJM: Nuclear proliferation is not inherently destabilising, and there is a logical argument,

④ Suitcase bomb

Prototype nuclear weapons of portable size and weight were designed by both the United States and Soviet Union during the 1950s and 1960s. However, it is still uncertain whether actual production of effective suitcase bombs (light enough to carry but with sufficient destructive yield) was successful.

Pakistan's Shaheen II medium-range ballistic missile blasts off on a test launch in March 2004. The missile's 2,000km range meant that Pakistan would be able to deliver nuclear warheads to almost any target in mainland India



“Nuclear weapons are not a panacea for ensuring world peace”

SIMON J MOODY

rooted in deterrence theory, that the emergence of more nuclear states might in fact bring greater stability to certain regions. India and Pakistan are both new nuclear states and, though some form of limited military conflict between the two rivals is a distinct possibility, the risks of a costly and unrestricted conventional conflict has largely been nullified by the presence of nuclear armouries.

Likewise, Israel is another example: though its status as a nuclear power has not been officially declared, the possibility of such states acquiring nuclear weapons might have reduced the existential threat of invasion by one or more of its openly hostile neighbours.

MG: Nuclear weapons are essentially an asymmetric tactic of choice: a single bomb offers a means of offsetting the balance of power. For large powers this is arguably less of an issue; for smaller powers it allows them to punch above their weight and compete with larger powers whose conventional armies dwarf their own. For this reason, a nuclear capability, regardless of its inherent difficulties and associated costs, is an attractive option for medium and small-sized powers.

In these sorts of scenarios, just one power in a region or conflict is likely to have a nuclear device, so the possibility of destabilisation is far greater. For this reason the proliferation activities of the Pakistani nuclear scientist **AQ Khan** ⁵ took on a great significance, because he sold blueprints and technical equipment to aspiring states including Iran, North Korea and Libya – with very real and frightening consequences.

Do you think that nuclear weapons will ensure world peace in the future?

MG: In a word: no. The deterrent effect of possession of a nuclear weapon is obvious and with historical precedent, but that does not mean that irrational leaders won't consider using them either pre-emptively or for a specific purpose.

While warfare increasingly moves towards the cyber domain and non-kinetic [electronic or other remote technological] means, nuclear weapons remain the diametric opposite. They are the red line that no state has crossed since August 1945, but this lack of use is not enough of an argument to say that they have ensured world

peace. They are a tactic of last resort, but peace will be pursued separate to nuclear weapons. That said, they are an important and valuable commodity to any defensive arsenal, so will remain a significant factor in world politics for the foreseeable future.

SJM: As a historian, I would naturally be reluctant to peer too deep into the future. What the historical record tells us, however, is that the security framework within which nuclear weapons have become so ingrained is remarkably stable, and that total war (as our grandfathers' and great-grandfathers' generations twice knew it), really does seem to be a relic of the industrial age. Yet nuclear weapons are not a panacea for ensuring world peace, as demonstrated by the proliferation of conventional conflicts since 1945. Real world peace rests on the ability of humans to solve their political differences through understanding, compassion and co-operation.

BP: Since the beginning of the nuclear age, nuclear weapons were not designed to prevent all forms of violence, and have not done so. The extent to which they have been central to the prevention of war between major powers since 1945 is also contested. They primarily generated a vulnerability, from the moment when undetectable submarine-launched ballistic missiles made it impossible to defend against a nuclear attack. Nuclear-weapon states have been attacked and lost wars against non-nuclear-weapon states, and actors willing to give their life for a cause may not fear nuclear retaliation. This is as true as it ever was.

As scholars and citizens, we have a responsibility in building the future. Perpetuating overconfidence in the controllability and safety of nuclear weapons allows for complacency. It neglects the role of luck and failures in avoiding nuclear weapons use in the past. Beyond the security dimension, the question of the future of nuclear weapons raises ethical and political issues about what kind of political communities we want to be in the eyes of future generations – and what we want to leave them. 🌐

DISCOVER MORE



The BBC World Service series **Witness** includes several episodes featuring first-person accounts of the Cuban Missile Crisis. All episodes are available online at bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02fj9yq



⁵ **AQ Khan**

Abdul Qadeer Khan is a Pakistani nuclear physicist who in the 1970s headed a uranium enrichment programme for his country's atomic bomb project. In 2004 it was revealed that Khan had sold nuclear technology to states including Iran, North Korea and Libya.

WARFARE AND CONFLICT

THE LONG READ

A short history of long-distance warfare

Dealing death from a safe distance has been the aim of fighters since the earliest times

BY JAMES ROGERS



European melee weapons from the 15th to 17th centuries. By that time, these close-combat arms were being usurped by crossbows and firearms



umans are pretty good at killing. From sharp rocks and blunt clubs to long-distance bombers and remote-controlled robots, the quest to kill in new and 'improved' ways has long captivated humanity's creative capacity. Yet at the heart of these developments is something revealing and rather disturbing. With each new epoch of weaponry and warfare

has come a separation of the human from the visceral heat of battle, from face-to-face fighting, and from the very act of killing. There are exceptions, of course: in any era of conflict, humans might still find themselves in hand-to-hand combat, but this is most certainly not the norm. Instead, over the *longue durée* of human history, countless attempts have been made to produce weapons that allow us to become more detached from those we kill.

There is a very prosaic reason for this. We distance ourselves from killing so that we do not incur the risk of being killed ourselves. Some may call this cowardly, yet it is no secret that societies and states have sought to save blood and treasure by protecting their fittest, fastest, most highly trained and brightest young fighters. If you can kill from a distance, with superior weapons, it negates the need to risk the sacrifice of life. This has been key to survival throughout history. Still, is this the only reason we seek weapons that distance us from the practice of killing? Or is there something less instinctive and more cognitively driven that explains why we choose to develop and then hide behind ever more advanced weapons?



Let's step back 10,000 years or so, to a time around the end of the last ice age. By the fertile and frequented shores of a lagoon in Kenya, 21 miles west of Lake Turkana, early peoples fished, drank fresh water and, as indicated by fragments of pottery from the area, foraged and stored food. This was a seemingly serene place, but don't be fooled: according to researchers from the University of Cambridge, this was also the site of the world's earliest recorded mass killings. Down by the banks of the lagoon, 27 foragers were brutally murdered by a rival group in an attack dubbed the 'Nataruk Massacre'. The history of this incident tells us a lot about the early human experience with weaponry.



A late Bronze/early Iron Age statue of the god Reshef bearing a mace and shield, found at Shomron, West Bank

AKG IMAGES

The crossbow was a great leveller: cheap, easy to use, powerful, accurate

The Cambridge archaeologists found the remains of pregnant women with their hands bound behind their backs, and of children whose bodies were peppered with arrowheads made from jet-black obsidian. They also found evidence of sharp-force trauma caused by spear-like weapons, and male skulls that had been smashed by blunt force, possibly using clubs or rocks. This was the earliest documented evidence of humanity's dark side in brutal action. A whole clan of people – a small society, with myths and customs now lost – was annihilated by a 'superior' group, certainly one with superior weapons. But why? It appears that the indiscriminate killing of rivals was an important survival strategy during this period, pitting one clan against the other. Perhaps there was rivalry over land, food or culture. This does not sound unfamiliar to modern ears: wars have been fought over less. And early weapons – spears, arrows and clubs – allowed our human ancestors to commit these 'crimes against humanity'. Those who had the more advanced weapons, and the preponderance of force, were able to kill off rivals and survive. This lesson was not lost throughout human 'progression'.



A 10,000-year-old skull excavated at Nataruk, north-west Kenya, showing evidence of attack with a rock or club during the mass slaughter of a clan by a rival group



Now let's jump forward to medieval Europe. Picture noble, chivalrous knights high on horseback, decked in chain mail and brandishing swords. Charging valiantly into chaotic, bloody battles, safe from the brutal melee below they thrust down and impale enemy footsoldiers. The training of knights began young. A teenage squire would accompany a knight into battle as a flag bearer or to hold a shield. As the boy got older and was strong enough to hold a heavy, full-length metal sword, he would be given the chance to prove his worth in battle. If he survived, he would be made a knight in his own right.

During the era of the crusades, though, a new threat to this noble (often wealthy, and usually Christian) system emerged. The crossbow had been around in China since at least the fifth-century, when Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* touched upon the energy bound up in bow and trigger. But in the 12th century the crossbow began to cause concern in Europe. It was likely brought to Britain during the Norman conquest, quickly spreading across Europe to become the weapon of choice for continental armies. The crossbow was a great leveller: it was cheap, easy to produce, even easier to use and, most importantly, deadly powerful and accurate. This meant that any society, even those outside Europe and deemed uncivilised, could build large armies of crossbow-wielding 'heathens' and – for the first time, it seemed – challenge the dominance of highly trained, wealthy (and expensive to replace) elite knights in shining armour. This brought fear to those in power. Such a weapon could not be left unregulated.

As historian Ralph Payne-Gallwey explained, the crossbow was "considered so barbarous" that it was banned by Pope Urban II in 1096 and again by Pope



A 15th-century illustration of the siege of Damascus (1148) depicts a soldier using a crossbow – a weapon that both alarmed and appealed to 12th-century European armies

Innocent II during the Catholic Church’s second Lateran Council in 1139. The punishment for using such a weapon “hateful to God and unfit for Christians” was anathema – excommunication by the pope. There is a key, telling caveat here, however: it was acceptable, and even encouraged, for Europeans to deploy the crossbow against those who weren’t European elites (and usually not Christian).

The crossbow would be the ideal weapon for the ‘civilised’ to kill the ‘uncivilised’ at distance. Richard the Lionheart was, for instance, an expert with the weapon, and would take potshots at the ‘ungodly’ for sport. In 1189–91, during the siege of Acre (on the northern Mediterranean coast of what’s now Israel) and while suffering from a fever, the king would “enjoy the pleasure of shooting bolts” at Turks and infidels to cheer him up. His action were sanctioned by the pope and by God because of the race and religion of his targets.

Perhaps, then, Europeans were not so civilised or chivalrous. Indeed, as European nations grew stronger from the 15th century and established themselves at the centre of the self-proclaimed civilised world, it became common for distancing weapons to be used unsparingly against ‘others’, even if those ‘others’ refused to take part in this sanitised, detached form of war. The rise of the modern gun is one example of this.



When describing guns in the late 16th century, a French soldier remarked that they were deployed by those “who would not dare look in the face of those whom they lay low with their wretched bullets”. If we explore the history of firearms – from early handguns to cannons and machine guns – it’s clear that these weapons allowed humans to kill with ever-greater ease and without human-to-human contact. Perhaps this is part of the allure. Gunpowder and ‘fire lances’ (spears with pyrotechnics attached) have caused fear in battle since their first use in China in the 10th century, allowing armies to terrorise their enemies from distance. These warriors would even tie fireworks and spears to animals – usually oxen – sending them in a panicked flurry towards the enemy in an attempt to strike fear. In the 13th century, trade with Asia along the Silk Roads brought gunpowder into European and Ottoman ranks. Though early weapons using gunpowder were inefficient, dangerous and cumbersome, by the 16th century more-powerful guns were being produced, and they replaced the bow as the most effective distance weapon.

Not everyone took kindly to such ‘advances’, however. Societies in Persia and across Islamic north Africa did not welcome the modern guns that came flooding in from the European continent. An example was the Mamluk sultanate, ruling from Cairo from the 13th century. This ancient Islamic society considered guns to be out of step with traditional ideas of a warrior’s honour. Furusiyya was the Mamluk equivalent of the chivalry and, as historian Shihab Al-Sarraf has written, it put an onus on nobility and skilled training for “close combat” and “the art of war itself”. Killing, if necessary, was to be done face to face and as a last resort. That’s not to say that they didn’t own both guns and cannons, but the Mamluks refrained

from using them in battle. According to historian Alexander DeConde, the Mamluks believed the gun to be unfit for use because of the “unchivalrous and immoral character of the weapon”.

There are those who dispute this – who claim that the Mamluks were unprepared and untrained for modern war – but the fact is that in 1517 the Mamluks placed guns and cannons on the battlefield against an invading Ottoman force, yet still did not use them against their foes. There is a lesson here, one that we have seen before. In time, the inability or moral refusal of the Mamluks to harness superior weapons ultimately led to their downfall. The society that did not use the gun would be annihilated, from distance, by stronger Ottoman forces that did. The victors were those who embraced the disturbingly distant and easy method of killing. Indeed, the Mamluks were just one of many states to suffer defeat during the 16th and 17th century, in part because of their rejection of firearms. The Iranian Safavid dynasty was reluctant to use such weapons, and were defeated in battle by the Ottomans in the 16th century – until they themselves adopted these weapons. And the British and French colonial campaigns in Africa – such as the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, in which the British used the Gatling gun (a proto machine gun) – provide reminders of how guns have been used to wipe out foes en masse and at distance. Yet, when it comes to weaponry, what goes around comes around, and it was not long before the world’s victorious empires would be turning these weapons on each other.



An inlaid bronze 14th-century basin shows Mamluk soldiers. The Mamluks’ refusal to fire guns exposed them to defeat by enemies who did use such weapons

Amid the trenches of the First World War, ‘no man’s land’ was a space between opposing enemies where all humans feared to tread. Some chose to face execution rather than raise their heads above the parapets. ‘Cowardice’ was punishable by firing squad. But what made these armies stop in their tracks and dig into the earth for safety? What made soldiers lose their minds, refuse to fight, and flee the field of battle – even though that act would also mean death for the men involved?

The answers were perched on the lips of trenches, surrounded by sandbags: machine guns. Fast, accurate, and powerful, these were ideal weapons when facing lesser and weaker armed forces. One of the first, invented around 1884, was the Maxim gun, named for its American-British inventor Hiram Stevens Maxim. With a rate of fire surpassing 500 rounds per minute, it was used to annihilate whole armies during the British and German colonial campaigns. Yet when these empires ultimately met each other on the battlefields of Europe, the machine gun would not be their saviour. Instead, it would cause the



BRIDGEMAN

By the 16th century, more-powerful guns replaced the bow as the most effective distance weapons



deaths of millions of their youngest, fittest and brightest. More than 41 million were killed and wounded in the First World War, including more than 300,000 Americans. And in the postwar era, other rising world powers – especially the US – looked to make war more ‘civilised’, turning to new weapons of ‘morality’, ‘distance’, and ‘sterile precision’ to help make war safer, winnable, ‘better’.



Introduced in 1918, the first pilotless aerial attack weapon was developed by the United States to mitigate the need to put its young soldiers at risk on the battlefield. Often called an early drone or cruise missile, the creators of the Kettering Bug referred to it as an ‘aerial torpedo’. The intention was to provide the US military with a weapon to comply with the ‘Over, not through’ principle that emerged after the First World War. The idea was to bomb enemy factories with pinpoint precision, the hope being that an enemy’s war-making capacity could be destroyed from the air without any human having to face that foe (or its machine guns) on the battlefield.

The ‘Bug’, as it came to be known, was one part of the project to remove the human from war. It was an unmanned device, set on rails, that would speed up along and take off from a ramp. When its engine had gone through a pre-set number of revolutions, the wings would detach and the Bug would plunge to earth “like a bird of prey”. In reality, the short range and unreliability of this futuristic machine made it of very little strategic use, but it marked the start of a search for high-tech solutions to the risks and dilemmas of ground warfare that had been triggered by the destructiveness of the machine gun. Such ambitions continue today within American warfare. The modern robotic drone is simply the latest manifestation of this drive to remove the human from harm’s way and to ‘perfect’ or sanitise warfare.

So, how does this ambition manifest itself in modern warfare? Today, when looking to recruit new drone pilots and sensor operators, the United States Air Force focuses on the perceived virtues and high-tech capabilities of the drone to draw in new blood. Recruits can be as young as 17 years old. Being part of the team that controls a state-of-the-art flying robot is badged as an exciting opportunity, but also a worthy one. The argument is that drones are ‘better’ than conventional weapons. Not only are they high-tech, futuristic and powerful but – thanks to their pin-point precision missiles, ability to loiter for long periods, and sophisticated video equipment – they can also distinguish between friend and foe on the ground, purportedly killing the ‘bad guys’ and saving the good.

What is important about the drone, of course, is that the pilot and operator are not physically near the conflict they are involved in. They are vital to success, and the drone itself is in the region of combat, yet it does not have a pilot inside. Instead, the drone’s controllers are usually thousands of miles away from the actual ‘battlefield’. At the end of the day they commute home. So they are able to deploy deadly

British soldiers aim a Maxim gun during the First World War. The large-scale carnage wreaked by machine guns in this conflict caused world powers to seek more ‘civilised’ ways of waging war



In 1918, the first pilotless aerial attack weapon was developed by the US to reduce the need to risk soldiers on the battlefield

ALAMY

force globally without risking their own lives – one of the unique selling points of the drone. US political and military elites can choose to confront perceived threats around the world without directly risking the lives of young Americans. Nevertheless, not everyone agrees that this form of warfare is of benefit to humanity.

Those of conscience, such as Desmond Tutu, Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, argue that armed drones undermine the moral standards and humanity that American society holds dear. In 2013, Tutu stated in an open letter to the editor of the *New York Times* that such policies are equivalent to apartheid, emphasising the dehumanising characteristics of the weapons that kill at such distance. Yet the robot campaigns continue apace, allowing one side in a conflict to kill another without any risk or fear of death. Like the arrow and spear or the crossbow and gun, they allow a dominant force to prevail and a weaker enemy to be extinguished – all without having to uncomfortably look an adversary in the eye.

In recent years, at least 542 lethal drone strikes were launched during the leadership of US president Barack Obama, and drone strikes are continuing under President Trump, while also being used in new and ever-more-indiscriminate ways. The death toll of non-combatants from US drone strikes is uncertain: official estimates number in the hundreds, and unofficial estimates in the thousands. But this is the point. The aim is to kill at such a distance that we cannot count the number of those we kill, let alone know their names, their beliefs, their intent.

A worrying trend to note about the future of war is that the United States is no longer alone in this practice of remote killing. Not only have at least 18 state actors acquired armed drones, but the use of a drone is now open to anyone with the ability to turn an off-the-shelf quadcopter into an airborne improvised explosive device. As a result, we have entered a new, long-desired epoch of warfare – one in which distancing weapons can take lives without risking that of the aggressor. Think back to the machine gun, though – surely the question we must ask is: will such ‘advances’ come back to haunt those who first promoted their use?



What does all this tell us about humanity, and about war? It is the future that the human race has long been building towards: to kill, yet to never really feel what it is like to take a life. To remove the need for face-to-face combat, the risk of visceral battle, from the killing loop. Throughout history our developments in weapons technologies have allowed us to carry out the exercise of killing in an increasingly detached, sterile and disconnected manner.

This is not to say that killing is ever ‘clean’. For those on the receiving end, it is always heinous and horrific. But it is easier to carry out the act at a distance as we are disconnected from the process. With our enemy at a distance, it also makes it easier for us to dehumanise our foe, to believe racially inspired myths. And it becomes easier to conduct killings that were once only carried out as a last resort and for survival. 🌐

James Rogers is assistant professor in war studies at the University of Southern Denmark and a fellow at LSE. He is on Twitter: @DrJamesRogers

Boys inspect the wreckage of a car hit by a drone strike in Yemen, 2017. At least 18 state actors have now acquired armed drones





A 1927 Chinese propaganda poster depicting, top centre, the country's nationalist leader Sun Yat-sen, who had died two years earlier. The poster exhorts people to continue his revolutionary work

WARFARE AND CONFLICT

Are revolutions doomed to failure?

After the end of communist rule in eastern Europe and the break-up of the Soviet Union, many observers suggested that revolutions never really achieve their objectives. But how do we judge the long-term outcome of such endeavours – and have any been truly successful?

Six historians debate the legacies of major revolts and uprisings

Charles Townshend

“Revolutions have far-reaching, complex and maybe contradictory effects that work out over very long periods of time”



Revolution has meant many things – except perhaps its literal meaning: a full-circle return to a previous state. In the modern world it has meant change, usually dramatic and rapid, often accelerated by violence. It has been applied to sudden seizures of power, but also to vast processes such as industrialisation and technological development.

(The United States even called its development of so-called ‘smart weapons’ the Revolution in Military Affairs.)

Variations in meaning bear directly on the issue of success or failure. In ‘palace revolutions’ (sometimes mistakenly labelled coups d’état), in which one general might seize power from another, the issue has been resolved after a short military clash. But such revolutions cause little change, beyond that of the Swiss bank account into which the proceeds of political power are transferred. Revolutions that have attempted to transform whole societies – the great French, Russian and Chinese uprisings – have far-reaching, complex and maybe contradictory effects that work themselves out over very long periods of time.

Because of this, success and failure can be hard to calibrate. Did the French Revolution fail? That’s certainly what Beethoven thought when he struck out the dedication of his *Eroica* symphony to Napoleon Bonaparte – but Bonaparte was a child of the revolution, and his dictatorship was a world away from the Bourbon monarchy. After the revolution, power derived from the nation, not God; democracy was built into it. Though many French people today see the revolution as a bloodstained disaster, they still hold to the ‘republican values’ it established.

A century ago, the Irish revolution promised not just to free Ireland from British rule, but to remake it as a new Gaelic society. This carried a price: partition, confining independence to 26 out of 32 Irish counties. Yet its centrepiece, the revival of the language, was never achieved, even if it still complicates the politics of Northern Ireland. Failure is relative; revolutions may not fail entirely, but most end in disillusionment.

Charles Townshend is professor emeritus of international history at Keele University, and author of *The Republic: The Fight for Irish Independence* (Allen Lane, 2013)

Evan Mawdsley

“Whether Russia’s 1917 October Revolution failed in an *Animal Farm* sense is open to dispute”



The Russian Revolution might seem to be a classic case of failure. The autocracy of Emperor Nicholas II was overthrown in February 1917, only to be replaced by Lenin’s ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ in October 1917 and by Stalin’s even worse rule of terror in the 1920s and 1930s. The events and outcome were caricatured in George Orwell’s allegorical *Animal Farm*,

which ends with the revolutionary pigs turning into humans, and the restoration of ‘Manor Farm’ – the old order.

In truth, things were more complicated than that precis suggests. Revolutions can fail or succeed in different ways. The earlier revolution of 1905 failed because the Tsar made concessions to the liberals, and because the forces of order remained intact. The Russian Revolution of February 1917 failed within eight months because the centrist (Duma) politicians who overthrew the Tsar did not satisfy popular economic demands, especially land reform, and did not bring an end to an unpopular war. The Russian Revolution of October 1917 surely did *not* fail, at least politically, in the sense that the radical group that brought it about remained in power until 1991. The Bolsheviks (later Communists) avoided failure, in the short term at least, by addressing the issues of land hunger and war-weariness. At the same time, they ruthlessly dealt with the forces of counter-revolution and disorder in the subsequent civil war.

Revolutions sometimes fail because they are attacked by counter-revolutionaries from beyond national borders. Revolutionary ‘Soviet’ Russia benefited from the impact of the First World War and its aftermath, which made effective foreign intervention impractical. Having said that, Lenin’s revolution was a failure, at least in its own ‘internationalist’ terms, because it could not immediately trigger similar uprisings in other countries (although it did do so in the late 1940s). Whether the October Revolution failed in an *Animal Farm* sense – by merely replacing the old ruling class with another oppressive and corrupt one – is more open to dispute. The Communists did not create a truly egalitarian polity, but they did bring about remarkable upward social mobility and mass education. The fact that this was implemented alongside Stalin’s cruel repression does not necessarily make it less revolutionary.

Evan Mawdsley was professor of international history at the University of Glasgow. His books include *World War II: A New History* (CUP, 2009)



An 18th-century cartoon satirises reactions to Louis XVI's attempt to flee France. "The French Revolution shows what can happen when the state fails on a catastrophic scale," argues Marisa Linton



Workers and soldiers' deputies meet in the former *duma* (state assembly) building in Petrograd (St Petersburg) in 1917. Evan Mawdsley disputes the idea that "Communists merely replaced the old ruling class with another"

Marisa Linton

"When the French revolutionaries chose war, they risked the revolution coming under the control of the army's leaders"



History is littered with instances of revolts that never became revolutions. Most uprisings of the oppressed are ruthlessly crushed by the ruling group. So what does it take for a revolt to become a revolution – if we define 'revolution' as a political regime change accompanied by social transformation that empowers the poor?

If the ruling group remains united, decisive and, above all, retains control of the army, then internal revolt is unlikely to succeed, at least without foreign intervention.

The French Revolution of 1789 shows what can happen when the state fails on a catastrophic scale. Financial crisis and the collapse of the old regime paved the way for the most shattering revolution the world had yet seen. It became, for many observers, the archetypal revolution. "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive," wrote Wordsworth. Liberty and equality became the watchwords, along with 'fraternity' – love of one's fellow man. So how did this idealism collapse within four years into war, civil war and terror?

This scenario was not inevitable, though made more likely by the reluctance of the king to co-operate with the new regime. His attempt to flee France, along with the revolutionaries' reckless decision to export the revolution abroad in a foreign war, fatally undermined the constitutional monarchy, leading to renewed revolution – and the terror that made a mockery of the revolutionaries' humanitarian aims.

Revolutions are overwhelming experiences for the people who live through them, including their leaders. By 1795, many of the leaders in France were either dead, in exile or exhausted – cynical and disillusioned with idealism. As one leader wrote: "We have lived six centuries in six years". Revolutions are, by their nature, politically destabilising. When the revolutionaries chose war, they risked the revolution coming under the control of the army's leaders. Ultimately, the revolution was destroyed by an opportunistic and unscrupulous general who seized his chance to become a military dictator. Many more people would die in Napoleon's wars than died under the revolutionary terror.

Marisa Linton is associate professor in history at Kingston University, and author of *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2013)

Michael A McDonnell

“Even many patriots were disappointed with the revolution’s outcome”



The American Revolution is often rightly seen as an example of a ‘successful’ revolution. A colonial resistance movement against imperial taxes snowballed into a successful war for independence that resulted in the creation of a union of states, in the federal constitution – and in the founding of a nation.

But we need to think carefully about how we define ‘success’, and from whose perspective we do so. Few patriots who protested against the Stamp Act in 1765 envisioned independence. Most were proud Britons at the time. And the myriad forces that led to that break also drove many to stay loyal to the British empire. Few remember the revolution as a civil war, but fighting among colonists across the new states was endemic, and some 70,000 colonists and enslaved people fled during the conflict.

African-Americans and Native Americans would also contest the success of the revolution. Many enslaved Americans already embraced patriot rhetoric that stressed liberty over tyranny, but were deeply disappointed that the revolutionary settlement did not include wholesale abolition, despite the fact that many enslaved people fought for their masters against the British during the war. Thousands of others instead fought for and tried to escape to British lines where at least some found freedom in far-flung places including Australia. Native Americans fought for their own independence against founding fathers who coveted their land and waged a war of conquest in the west. It was only the constitution of 1789 that gave the newly united states sufficient force to overcome the still powerful native nations on their borders.

Finally, even many patriots were disappointed with the outcome. Radicals who embraced abolition, a broader suffrage and more representative assemblies were often defeated by conservative forces in the individual states when new governments were formed. And though the federal constitution is often seen as a revolution in politics and political thinking, its creators deliberately set out to curb the more democratic tendencies of the state governments in the name of stability.

Americans still wrestle with the revolution’s ambiguous legacy: the vagaries of the electoral college, state versus federal rights, and the inequalities perpetuated by the creation of a nation rhetorically dedicated to freedom, but built by enslaved African-American labourers on Native American lands.

Michael A McDonnell is associate professor in history at the University of Sydney

Robert Bickers

“The preservation of China’s territorial integrity triumphed over the aspirations of its people”



The 1911 revolution in China began with a farce and ended in tragedy. Launched when a cigarette-smoking bomb-maker blew himself and his comrades to smithereens, it finished when the first man democratically elected to be prime minister was assassinated by the president’s secret service at a railway station in Shanghai.

The bombing unleashed the fury of 20 years of ethno-nationalist propaganda that saw thousands slaughtered in pogroms, as the uprising advanced across the sprawling Qing empire ruled by the Manchu dynasty. As chaos spread, a great fear grew that foreign powers – which, barely 11 years earlier, had sent troops into northern China to suppress the anti-colonial Boxer uprising (1899–1901) – would seize the moment to carve up the country. Like so many other revolutions, this one ended in uneasy compromise. The Manchu rulers abdicated and a new strongman, Yuan Shikai – once head of an important Qing army – became president of a new republic. China was saved from extinction, and the republic incorporated all of the lands ruled by the Manchus (except Tibet and Mongolia, which broke free). The former emperor was even allowed to keep the ‘Forbidden City’, his palace at the heart of the capital.

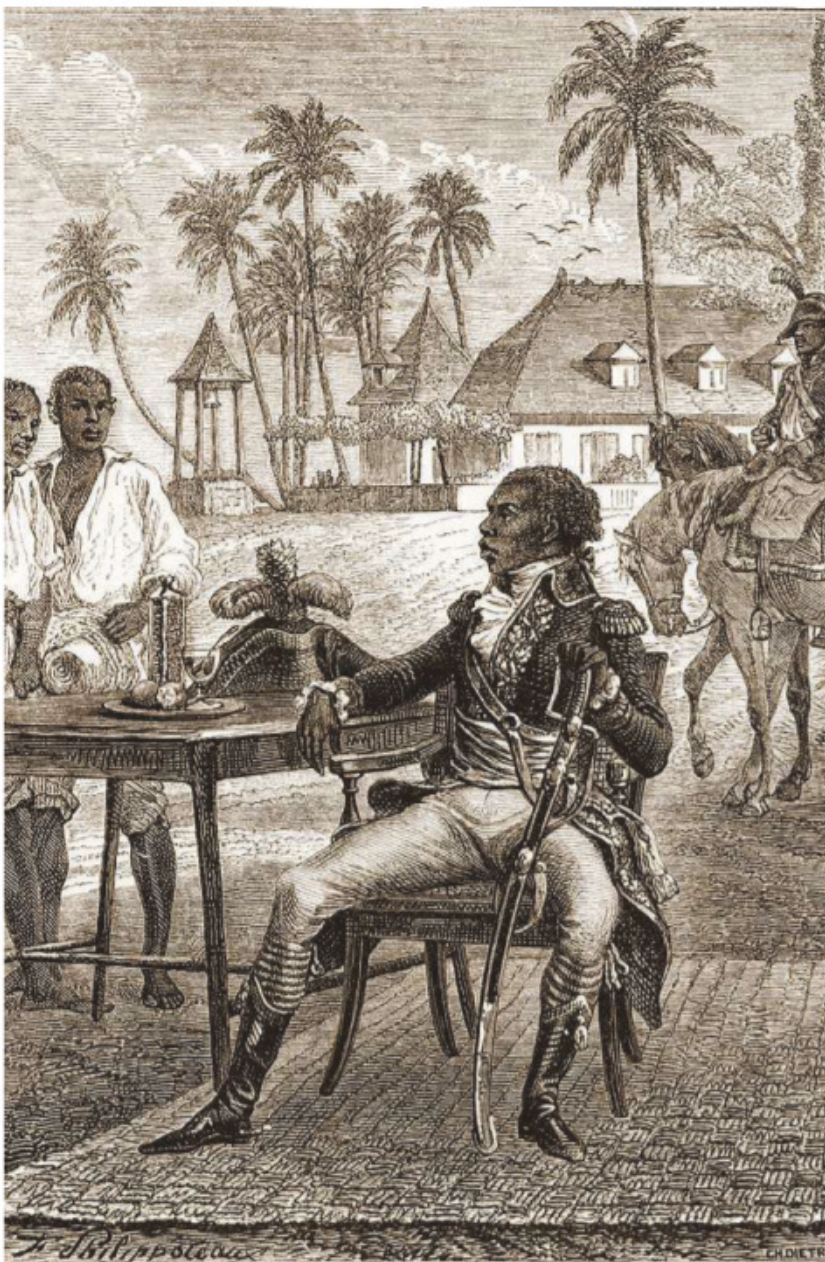
But Yuan Shikai was no republican. Between December 1912 and January 1913, millions of voters selected an electoral college that chose a new national assembly – the first and only time that mainland China has held anything approaching a free, democratic election. The revolutionaries won the vote, but in March 1913 their prime minister designate was assassinated. The murder sparked a ‘Second Revolution’, pitching the nationalist revolutionaries against Yuan Shikai. They were defeated, the revolution failed, and 40 years of political disintegration and vicious strife followed.

The preservation of China’s territorial integrity triumphed over the aspirations of its people. But the incomplete revolution prompted a far darker turn. It seemed to many that it was China’s culture itself – not Yuan, nor foreign influences – that obstructed all hope of progress. To remove that obstruction, the revolutions that unfolded during the years in which Mao Zedong controlled the country aimed to destroy every last vestige of the old order. Decades of agony would ensue.

Robert Bickers is professor of history at the University of Bristol, and author of *Out of China: How the Chinese Ended the Era of Western Domination* (Allen Lane, 2017)



A teapot protests the 1765 Stamp Act – one of several taxation measures imposed on American colonies by the British that sparked unrest and fuelled activities that evolved into the American Revolution



An engraving of Toussaint Louverture, leader of the Haitian Revolution that began as a slave revolt in 1791 but became a long-running and eventually successful battle for independence from the French

Charles Forsdick

“A revolt of the enslaved turned into a disciplined revolutionary movement”



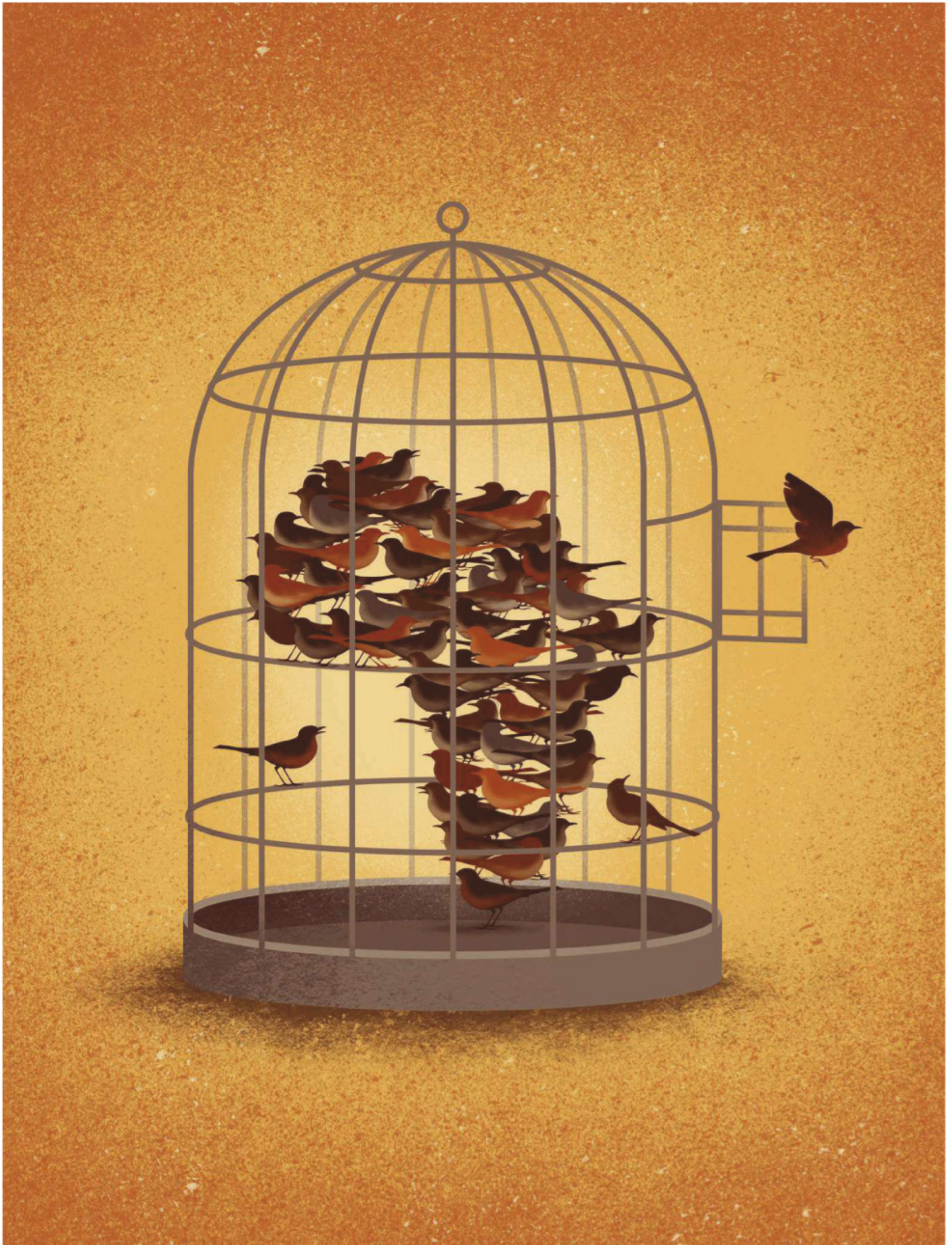
Although the Haitian Revolution has been described as the “only successful slave revolt in history”, it is equally associated with the inevitability of revolutionary failure. Western media often perpetuate an account of Haitian history that implies a teleology of decline. An extreme version of this was evoked following the January 2010 earthquake, which the US funda-

mentalist preacher Pat Robertson blamed on a “pact with the devil” (an allusion to the August 1791 vodou ceremony seen as the trigger for the revolution). According to such a narrative, the revolution represents a tipping point in the passage from colonial abundance to postcolonial impoverishment.

Such an account downplays the extent to which – by most criteria – the Haitian Revolution was, in fact, a major success. The wealth of the ‘pearl of the Antilles’ depended on a brutal system of plantation slavery that denied the freedom and humanity of the enslaved. The revolution represented an extension of the French revolutionary spirit of 1789 but was, more importantly, the culmination of resistance evident throughout Atlantic slavery. Under the leadership of Toussaint Louverture, a revolt of the enslaved turned into a disciplined revolutionary movement that defeated French, British and Spanish forces, delivering universal emancipation from slavery (decades before French abolition in 1848) and liberation from colonial France.

In the revolution itself were, nevertheless, seeds of the failures that followed in its wake. Central to these were decisions regarding the systems required to replace plantation slavery. Afro-Trinidadian historian CLR James saw Louverture’s tragic flaw as his inability to communicate this to the people. Independence was followed by civil war associated with government based on skin tone, by diplomatic ostracisation as world powers sought to quarantine the impact of Haiti’s revolution, by the crippling debt imposed by France in return for recognition of independence in 1825. Despite attempts to ‘silence’ its importance, the impact of the revolution is, nevertheless, evident in abolitionism, anti-slavery revolts and other political radicalism throughout the 19th century. The limitations of the Haitian Revolution are primarily associated with its failure to defend the gains achieved. It has, though, continued to shape and inspire political movements today, suggesting that, far from having failed, the Haitian Revolution remains still unfinished. 🌐

Charles Forsdick is James Barrow Professor of French at the University of Liverpool, and co-author of *Toussaint Louverture: A Black Jacobin in the Age of Revolutions* (Pluto, 2017)



Is **Africa** a prisoner of its past?

The transatlantic slave trade, colonial domination and the 'scramble for Africa' all had a profound impact on the continent's economic, political, social and cultural structures. But what is their legacy today?

Six historians share their opinions on how Africa's past has shaped what are often arbitrarily designated modern nations

Emma Dabiri

“It is far easier to continue the centuries-old trope of African barbarity, or at best incompetence”



During an appearance on Irish television, controversy ensued after I suggested that we don't need any more “white saviours” in Africa. To my great surprise, I was immediately met with a comment about “darkest Africa” from a fellow panellist. Though this is a phrase with which I am all too familiar, I have not heard it employed with any degree of seriousness in

years. Nonetheless, it was a stark reminder that many continue to perceive the continent thus.

As Hugh Trevor-Roper, the eminent Oxford professor of history, declared in 1962: “Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at the present there is none – there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness... and darkness is not a subject of history.”

The fact remains that Africa's past has been almost entirely obscured by an infrastructure that sought to – that *seeks* to – legitimise the damage that Europe did to it, and to its people: devastation that the forces of global capital continue to perpetuate through various means of exploitation and extraction.

Africa remains a prisoner of the lies told about its pre-colonial past, and of the legacy of its colonial history. The kidnapping of millions of able-bodied young people in their prime, the destruction of complex societal organisation, the decimation of often egalitarian and socially just spiritual belief systems and philosophies – all these paved the way for the creation of fictitious states. They allowed the engineering of narrow, fixed, nationalistic ethnic identities to replace the far more fluid affiliations that existed previously, as well as the installation of despotic leaders supporting the interests of political and economic elites in the global north.

Any meaningful acknowledgement of this remains a long way off. Instead it is far easier to continue the centuries-old trope of African barbarity, or at best incompetence, and the myth of ‘well-intentioned’ intervention (though Africans, mysteriously, rarely seem to benefit from these interventions).

When you next hear the phrase “darkest Africa”, or any of its multiple iterations, reflect on the words of Nigeria's first Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka: “The darkness so readily attributed to the ‘Dark Continent’ may yet prove to be nothing but the wilful cataract in the eye of the beholder.”

Emma Dabiri is a social historian, writer, broadcaster, and the author of *Don't Touch My Hair* (Allen Lane, 2019)



A cyclist passes a wall painted with the Coca-Cola logo in Uganda. “Africans have survived the modernisation project; now they can claim to be the first to experience the full destructive force of western neo-liberalist capitalism,” argues Alfred Zack-Williams



A wooden headdress featuring a representation of a slave trader (with European-style hat) and an enslaved female figure. “Africa remains a prisoner of the lies told about its pre-colonial past, and of the legacy of its colonial history,” says Emma Dabiri

GETTY IMAGES/ALAMY

Alfred Zack-Williams

“From the slave trade to the colonial project, Africans have been impelled to adapt to new situations and political economies”



I have often contemplated this question: what would have been Africa's destiny had Christopher Columbus's 1492 project not materialised? Columbus's arrival in the Americas gave a fillip to 'early globalisation', yet for Africans it marked the beginning of global humiliation and the loss of political autonomy.

The ensuing Atlantic slave trade caused millions of Africa's most able people to be carted away from their homelands. The result was economic, political and social disruption from which Africa is yet to fully recover, as witnessed by internecine conflicts impacting on Africa's social, political and economic development. Furthermore, the upheaval accompanying the slave trade reduced the ability of the pre-existing formations to resist colonial infiltration.

Though the slave trade set in train material and moral devastation, as the noted historian of Africa JD Fage pointed out, the rise of states such as Benin, Ashanti and Dahomey is closely connected with demand for slaves by Europeans. Dahomey made a quick transition from a slave port to a major palm-oil market when slavery became illegal. Equally, the Gold Coast was transmogrified into a major cocoa exporter with the same enthusiasm with which Africans appropriated western education.

These are examples of how Africans have confirmed the edict of Heraclitus of Ephesus: “You cannot step twice into the same river.” Far from being a prisoner of its past, Africa has been all too ready to try new ideas, commodities and forms of governance, as well as to accommodate ‘strangers’, some of whom have surreptitiously transformed themselves into their oppressors.

These references to Africa's early encounters with Europe point to the fact that, though its past has not been all auspicious, Africans have not been contemptuous of new ideas. From the slave trade to the colonial project, Africans have been impelled to adapt to new situations and political economies. They have survived the modernisation project. Now they can claim to be the first to experience the full destructive force of western neo-liberalist capitalism, thanks to neo-colonialism.

Alfred Zack-Williams is emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Central Lancashire

Martin Meredith

“The new states of Africa possessed no ethnic, class or ideological cement to bind disparate peoples”



Sixty years after the dawn of Africa's era of independence, the colonial past continues to have a profound impact on much of the continent. Almost all of the modern states of Africa are artificial entities constructed by European powers during their scramble for territory at the end of the 19th century. By the time the scramble was over, 10,000 African polities had been merged into

40 European colonies or protectorates.

The maps used to carve up the African continent were mostly inaccurate; large areas were described simply as *terra incognita*. When drawing up the boundaries of new territories, officials frequently resorted to drawing straight lines on the map, paying scant attention to the myriad monarchies, chiefdoms and other societies on the ground. Most colonies encompassed scores of diverse groups that shared no common history, culture, language or religion. Some spanned the great divide between the desert regions of the Sahara and the belt of tropical forests to the south, throwing together Muslim and non-Muslim in latent hostility.

Colonial rule, imposed with authoritarian vigour, held together the new territories effectively enough. But after little more than 70 years, faced with a rising tide of anti-colonial protest and insurrection, European governments handed over to independence movements.

The new states of Africa, however, were not ‘nations’. They possessed no ethnic, class or ideological cement to help bind their disparate peoples, no strong historical and social identities upon which to build. For a relatively brief period, the anti-colonial cause provided a unity of purpose. But once the momentum to oust colonial rule had subsided, so other loyalties and ambitions came thrusting to the fore, precipitating ethnic rivalry and tension, often exploited by politicians for their own ends.

From the outset, African leaders became preoccupied with the problems of political control, of holding the state together, of simply staying in power. Decades have been lost in internal conflict and instability. Whatever challenges they have faced, though, African governments have remained adamant that the boundaries they inherited from colonial rulers should remain in place. The past thus continues to cast its shadow.

Martin Meredith is a historian, journalist and writer. His books include *Fortunes of Africa: A 5,000 Year History of Wealth, Greed and Endeavour* (Simon & Schuster, 2014)



Gus Casely-Hayford

“Colonialism was underwritten by bad history. We should set right those appalling histories with a new body of thinking”



Africa is as much a victim of a constructed past as it is a casualty of its actual history – and we have a responsibility to set right both of those.

Much of our understanding of Africa’s past – and, indeed, its present – was confected during the Enlightenment. During the 18th and 19th centuries, philosophers and intellectuals skewed and tainted our perception of Africa and its cultures. The words of men such as Locke served to justify slavery, the thinking of men such as Hegel and Kant intellectually underwrote colonialism, and the theories of men such as Hume were used to justify racism. Hume famously observed of people of African descent that “not a single one was ever found who presented greatness in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality”, pointing out that “so fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour”.

Africa and peoples of African descent have struggled to break free from these appalling perspectives. The intellectual underpinnings of this thinking continue to cloud so much of our current educational approach. You see the legacies of these terribly jaundiced views in the way that Africa is still framed in museums, the way it is reflected in the media and taught in our schools.

Simultaneously, it must not be forgotten that running alongside these unfortunate phenomena are the actual profound legacies of slavery, colonialism, post-independence wars and political mismanagement. Thankfully, these are issues that are increasingly written about, and huge energy is quite rightly deployed in addressing them. But the west owes Africa another debt. Colonialism was underwritten by bad history – and we should now work to set right those appalling histories with a new body of thinking that better addresses the indigenous pre-colonial stories and traditional African cultures.

Gus Casely-Hayford is the inaugural director of V&A East, set to open in 2023. He’s also the writer and presenter of two series of *Lost Kingdoms of Africa* on BBC Four, and *Tate Britain’s Great British Walks*, which aired on Sky Arts

Marika Sherwood

“Lines were drawn on the map to define colonies. Histories of warfare and historical boundaries were ignored”



Africa has four ‘pasts’: the period before the trade in enslaved Africans, the trade itself, colonial rule, and ‘independence’. Before the 16th century, Africa was divided into what were effectively nations. Some had hierarchical governments under chiefs or kings; others were what we might call socialist, with decisions made by elders. Some

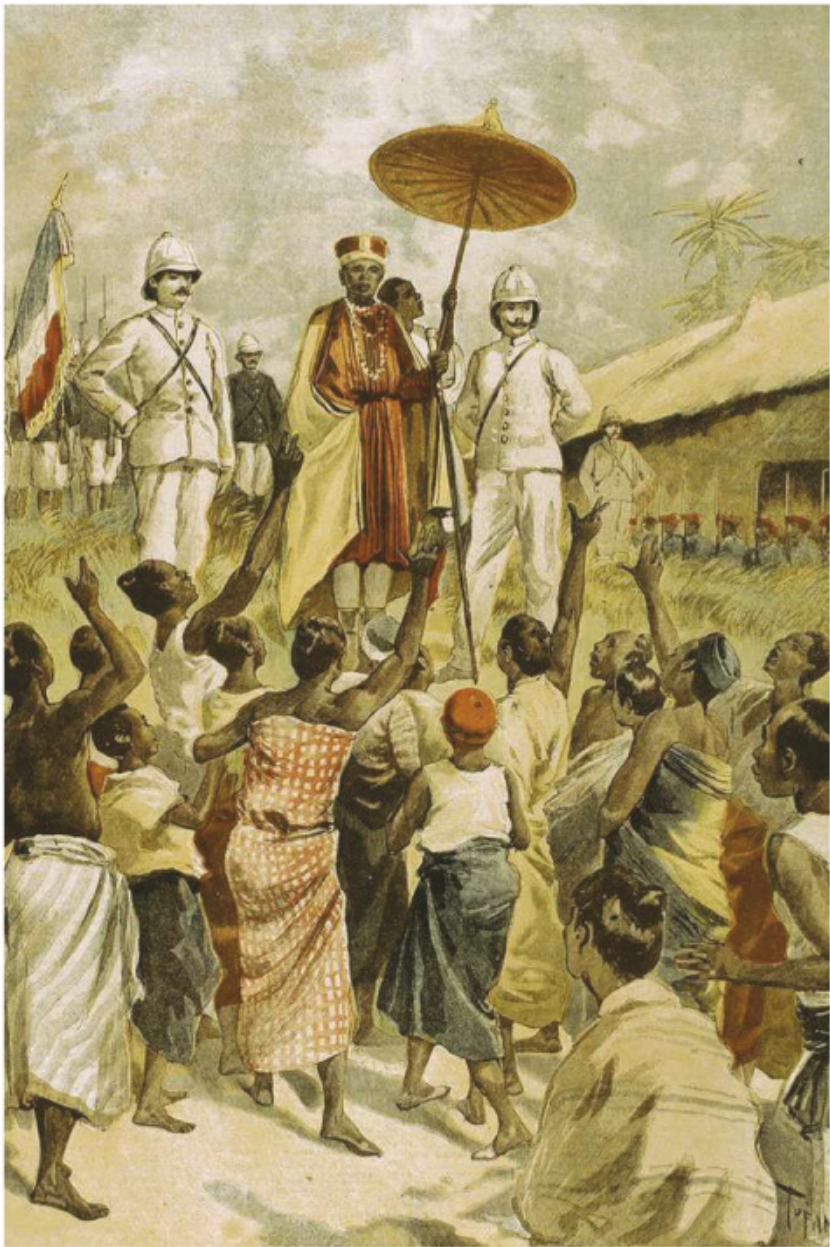
ambitious kings enlarged kingdoms by conquest. Trade between nations was common.

In medieval times, slavery was as common in Africa as in Europe. In Africa the enslaved usually worked in their masters’ fields, and in many cultures were absorbed into their owners’ families. Presumably, when the Europeans began trading in humans in Africa in the early to mid-16th century, those selling slaves to them imagined that the people they exchanged for European goods (often guns) would receive the same treatment.

As Europe’s empires grew, more enslaved Africans were required. Trading stations were set up along the African coast, and deals concluded with local kings and chiefs. Slaves were the prisoners of war resulting from conflicts now fought only for their acquisition. So there were many wars, and kidnapping raids deep into the interior. It is estimated that 12.5 million Africans were exported, and that around four million died in the process of enslavement.

With the arrival of machinery and the emigration of millions from Europe, the need for slaves in the Americas ceased. What Europe then wanted from Africa was its raw materials. So in 1884 the great European powers met in Berlin to divide Africa among themselves. Lines were drawn on the map to define colonies. Histories of warfare and historical boundaries were ignored. The British imposed ‘indirect rule’: kings and chiefs were ‘persuaded’ to keep the peace and supply labourers. In many instances these wars flared up after independence; for example, the vicious Nigerian civil war (or Biafran War) of the late 1960s was fought to prevent the secession of the Igbo peoples from Nigeria.

Marika Sherwood is a historian and author specialising in issues of slavery and colonial Africa



Agoli-agbo, the last king of Dahomey (now Benin), greets his subjects in 1894, flanked by Frenchmen. His predecessor, Béhanzin, went into exile after defeat by the French, who incorporated Dahomey into the vast colonial territory of French West Africa



Biafran demonstrators call for secession in July 1968 during the Nigerian civil war. 'Nations' created by colonial powers forced together disparate ethnic groups, leading to numerous conflicts after independence

Hakim Adi

“Military intervention is just one characteristic of the ‘new scramble for Africa’”



In 1945, Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta and other key figures in African independence movements gathered at the famous Manchester Pan-African Congress. They demanded an end to Africa’s colonial and arbitrarily imposed borders, condemned the alien political institutions imposed on the continent by Europe’s colonial rulers, and demanded an end to

an economic system that they referred to as the “monopoly of capital”. Nearly 75 years later, millions of Africans still have no power to determine the borders, political institutions and economic system that hold the continent in their grip. In this sense, Africa is still struggling against the legacy of its colonial past.

However, today Africa has additional problems. There’s the military intervention of the US Africa Command (Africom), a key weapon in the United States’ intense economic and military rivalry with China and other emerging powers in a new scramble for Africa’s resources and increasingly important markets. Then there is Nato’s military intervention, which has resulted in regime change and total destabilisation in Libya but also evident in many other African countries. Such intervention has been used in former French colonies Mali and Côte d’Ivoire, and increasingly in the ‘war on terror’ in other parts of west Africa.

Military intervention is just one characteristic of the ‘new scramble for Africa’, however. The impact of neo-liberal globalisation is also evident in the many examples of neo-colonial economic intervention and domination. Enslaving economic ‘aid’ from powerful nations is used as subsidy for multinational companies, and to force African countries to privatise their utilities, or to purchase products or services abroad at the expense of their citizens. There are also the many unequal ‘partnership’ agreements – for example, the Cotonou Agreement signed with the EU in 2000, includes an economic dimension but also demands that African countries submit themselves to the International Criminal Court, which appears to try predominantly Africans and has no interest in the crimes committed during the colonial era.

The anti-colonial struggles of millions of Africans have led to much progress since 1945 – yet the struggle continues. 🌐

Hakim Adi is professor of the history of Africa and the African diaspora at the University of Chichester, and co-author of *Pan-African History* (Routledge, 2003)



Has Russia always played by its own rules?

Following Russia's purported interference in the 2016 US presidential election and suspected role in the poisoning of an intelligence officer in Salisbury in 2018, nine historians offer their opinions on whether such actions reflect Russia's historical attitude to internationally accepted conventions

Janet Hartley

“The common perception in western and central Europe was that Russia was not ‘one of us’”



“Russia is a European state.” Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia, made this statement in 1767 in her *Instruction* – a document presented as a guide, at home and abroad, to the fundamentally ‘European’ forms of government shared by Russia with other ‘civilised’ states of central and western Europe. Catherine was a German princess, but her

assumptions were shared by her predecessor, Peter the Great, who attempted to modernise Russian society and institutions along western European lines, as well as her grandson Alexander I, who saved ‘Europe’ from the tyranny of Napoleon, and all of the tsars up to 1917. Imperial Russia was part of Europe, and therefore followed European rules.

How did this Europeanness manifest itself? Russia shared European Christian traditions and participated in all forms of European culture. European ideas and philosophy – on forms of government, society, crime and punishment – were considered relevant to Russia. Russia followed the norms of European diplomacy and was an accepted member of the European states system. Russian armies fought in the same manner as European armies. Furthermore, the tsars consciously copied European institutions, laws and noble titles. They deliberately moulded noble and urban society so that their subjects behaved, and even looked, like west Europeans.

There were, however, two problems. First, implementation of European-style institutions was always limited by distinctive Russian features: the sheer size of the empire, which made implementation of change difficult; the existence of serfdom until 1861, which restricted social and economic development; the unwillingness of the tsars to limit their own powers until forced to do so in 1906 after the previous year’s revolution; the slow evolution of a legal consciousness and professional civil service. Second, a common perception in western and central Europe was that Russia was not ‘one of us’; it was backward and not to be trusted. However much it tried to follow, or considered it was following, European rules it was never accepted as a fully European state. This uneasy relationship continued until Soviet Russia broke the accepted rules of diplomacy in 1918, threatened world revolution and went its own way.

Janet Hartley is professor of international history at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her books include *Siberia: A History of the People* (Yale University Press, 2014)

Helen Rappaport

“Russia’s isolation remains largely self-imposed – a reaction to a sense of being encircled by enemies”



Queen Victoria had trouble making sense of Russia. In 1838, her prime minister Viscount Melbourne defined its fortress mentality. Russia, he explained, “retires into inaccessibility, into her snows and frosts”. Appalled at Russia’s “total want of principle”, Victoria saw it as a threat. Russians were “so unscrupulous” and “*totally* antagonistic to England”.

Aspirations had been different when Peter the Great, looking westward in the early 18th century, had sought to modernise the backward Russian state. But his was an empire that remained stubbornly different: strange, semi-Asiatic and, quite simply, not like us. Seeing off the Swedes and the French, Russia resisted encroachments by the west and its rule of law. Tsaritsa Alexandra summed it up during the 1900s, saying that the Russians didn’t understand democracy – they understood only autocratic rule.

The Soviet imposition of the Warsaw Pact, the comprehensive defence treaty between most eastern European communist states, in the post Second-World-War years underlined a determination to resist the encroachment of Nato and its liberal values. Despite brief periods of rapprochement during the *glasnost* era under Gorbachev, and after the 1991 fall of communism, its continuing isolation remained largely self-imposed – a reaction to a sense of being encircled by enemies.

A recent manifestation of Russia’s attitude to rules has been in sport doping scandals. Rules are there to be flouted, and – with an unerring conviction of its inviolability to punishment (beyond economic sanctions) – Russia has continued to act in breach of international law and human rights: annexing Crimea, the support of Ukrainian separatist forces and of Assad in Syria. The world has protested – to no avail. Russia continues to play only to its old, entrenched Soviet rules of engagement.

Recent events in Salisbury have prompted talk of a renewal of the old enmities of the Cold War. But in truth they never went away. The old nationalism of the tsars has been resurrected with the inexorable rise of Vladimir Putin – a man bent on consolidating the regime entirely to his own agenda, as manifested in the antidemocratic Soviet tactics of murder, provocation and intimidation. As a Russian once observed to the 19th-century German diplomat Count Münster: “Every country has its own constitution. Ours is absolutism moderated by assassination”.

Helen Rappaport is a writer and historian, author of books including *The Race to Save the Romanovs* (Hutchinson, 2018)



Russian Empress Catherine II (The Great), painted by Johann Baptist Lampi the Elder c1793. She continued efforts by her predecessor, Peter the Great, to modernise Russia along European lines



A soldier waves a Russian flag from his tank on 21 August 1991 after the failure of a military coup against Mikhail Gorbachev. His rule saw the beginning of brief periods of rapprochement with the west

David V Gioe and Michael S Goodman

“From the Russian perspective, there is no statute of limitations on betrayal”



On 4 March 2018, former Soviet military intelligence officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia were found unresponsive in Salisbury, southern England, most likely poisoned with Novichok, a nerve agent known to be in the Russian inventory.

According to press accounts, Skripal served British intelligence for at least a decade, handing over information that was

damaging to Russia. Skripal was arrested and in 2006 convicted of treason in Russia, but in 2010 was exchanged in a spy swap between Russia, the UK and the United States. He was resettled in the south of England and kept a relatively low profile, but was not in hiding.

Moscow has a long history of murdering perceived enemies of the state in faraway places. Those cooperating with the west, especially in intelligence, have been targeted for assassination in particular. In 1937, recently defected Soviet intelligence officer Ignace Reiss was executed in Switzerland; his friend and former colleague Walter Krivitsky defected a month later and was killed in Washington DC in 1941. Domestically, Russian assassinations have taken various forms that are intended as gruesome political theatre as well.

Perceived enemies of the Russian state, as during the Soviet era before it, have met their ends in many ways. Though being pushed out of windows, hung or bludgeoned are terrifying ways to die, the Russian fascination with assassination by poison endures. Poison is appealing for a few reasons. First, it is quiet and can be administered in the open; second, the victim suffers, often publicly.

After the Skripal poisoning, UK foreign secretary Boris Johnson stated that the “use of this nerve agent would represent the first use of nerve agents on the continent of Europe since the Second World War”. This ignores the 1978 murder by ricin of Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov on Waterloo Bridge. Although ricin may not technically be a nerve agent, Johnson’s statement about changing norms is a distinction without a difference given the various ways Russians have been poisoned in Britain since Markov’s murder.

The Russian message to intelligence defectors, critical journalists and oligarch rivals is clear – choose your team carefully and ask yourself: can they protect you in perpetuity? From the Russian perspective, there is no statute of limitations on betrayal. Simply because one was traded to the west in a spy swap, as Skripal was, does not mean forgiveness – nor that the betrayal was forgotten.

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at the Department of War Studies, KCL. This analysis is theirs alone and does not represent the position of their employers

Dina Gusejnova

“Russian foreign policy is no longer internationalist but retaliatory”



Does the word ‘Russia’ describe the modern Russian Federation, the Soviet Union and the Russian empire interchangeably? Using such a shorthand highlights that these very different regimes maintained supreme authority over an overlapping geographical and cultural territory. But when it comes to their global orientation, the differences can be more significant.

Under the imperial and Soviet regimes, the idea of a special destiny, associated with autocracy and Orthodoxy as well as Soviet party doctrine, went hand in hand with international engagement. Soft power was used extensively, from the Holy Alliance formed in 1815 by Russia, Austria and Prussia, to the institutionalisation of international arbitration at The Hague in the late 1890s, where Russian lawyers played a central role, to the Soviet policies of cultural internationalism under the Communist International (Comintern).

The Russian Federation today has no such ideological capacity. What is left are fragments of older ideological frontiers: the notion of an Orthodox world, set against the Ottoman, Catholic and Protestant spheres of domination, or the Bolsheviks’ dismissive attitudes towards ‘western’ legal systems. Soviet practices of lending support to specific political stakeholders in unstable regions through targeted secret intelligence interventions, established during the Spanish Civil War, continue to set precedents, though such forms of conducting military affairs are not unique to Russia. Like the FSB (successor of the KGB/NKVD), MI6 and the FBI celebrated centenaries in the decade from 2008 to 2018.

Imperial and Soviet Russia were internationalist in outlook even when they endorsed special paths; by contrast, today, Russian foreign policy takes the form of a retaliatory interventionism. As the smaller states of the Warsaw Pact sought protection from the EU and Nato, post-Soviet Russia was left with an uncertain patchwork of alliance-building reacting against both. There is no alternative ideological structure such as the Comintern, nor is Russia willing to shape existing institutions of international law to its own liking. Instead, its key political leaders, including the president, the banking sector and the church, have developed personal stakes in the global economy. As Russia is adapting to a changing world, these Russians are truly playing by their own rules.

Dina Gusejnova is assistant professor at the University of Sheffield and author of *European Elites and Ideas of Empire, 1917–1957* (CUP, 2016)

Geoffrey Roberts

“The Bolsheviks aimed to overthrow capitalism, but chose to use traditional diplomacy and its rules”



After the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia in 1917 they aimed to break all the rules of international relations by promoting a global revolution to destroy capitalism and establish a worldwide socialist federation based on class solidarity.

Bolshevik efforts to spread revolution were spearheaded by the Communist International (Comintern), and supported actively by Soviet diplomats, who conducted themselves more like agitators than ambassadors. This coalescence of revolution and diplomacy was reinforced by massive foreign power intervention in the Russian Civil War. An apocalyptic vision of Soviet Russia grappling in a life-and-death struggle with international capitalism became central to the Bolsheviks’ post-revolutionary identity.

Soviet diplomacy reverted to a more traditional role after the civil war, when diplomatic recognition, trade deals and peaceful coexistence were top priorities. Though the Bolsheviks still aimed to overthrow world capitalism, they also chose to make use of traditional diplomacy and its rules. Indeed, by the 1930s, when the Soviet Union joined the League of Nations, Moscow was the foremost champion of state sovereignty and of the principle of non-interference in other states’ domestic affairs. Moscow continued to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries through the Comintern but Soviet diplomats insisted that was purely a communist party matter. A century later the Putin regime remains committed to the principles enunciated by Soviet diplomacy in the 1920s. But there is no equivalent of the Comintern, nor any discernible ambition to universalise the politics and culture of contemporary Russia.

Like all great powers Russia pays lip service to state sovereignty but defends its interests by every means, including meddling in other states’ internal affairs. Soviet Russia aspired to subvert western liberal democracy, but Putin’s aims are much more limited and defensive: secure borders, friendly neighbours, and recognition for Russia as a respected global political player.

In only one detail is Putin truly an ideological child of the Bolshevik Revolution – in his determination to insulate Russia from western-inspired machinations for regime change.

Geoffrey Roberts is emeritus professor of history at University College Cork. His books include *The Soviet Union in World Politics: Coexistence, Revolution and Cold War, 1945–1991* (Routledge, 1999)

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“Capitalists of the world, unite!” – a satirical Russian poster from c1920, reflecting Bolshevik attitudes towards western nations. “An apocalyptic vision of Soviet Russia grappling in a life-and-death struggle with international capitalism became central to the Bolsheviks’ post-revolutionary identity,” says Geoffrey Roberts

Catherine Danks

“Putin advocates a ‘managed democracy’, stressing patriotism and traditional Russian values”



In the 1920s, Russian émigrés developed a concept of Eurasianism as an ideological alternative to Bolshevism. They believed Russia was a unique civilisation, and that it should neither adopt western liberalism and democracy nor entirely reject it. By drawing on Eurasia’s rich diversity and incorporating the best from both the west and east, they believed that Russia could

forge a third way best suited to its culture and traditions.

In the 1990s, post-communist Russia set out to become a western-style, liberal, democratic, capitalist economy with an Atlanticist foreign policy. This was a time of turmoil, instability and very real economic hardship for most Russians. According to one 1997 public opinion survey, 60% of Russians rejected the Washington-inspired capitalist model and believed that Russia was on the wrong path. A new form of Eurasianism, which accused the west of deliberately foisting an alien reform package designed to fatally weaken Russia, gained support amongst both communists and nationalists.

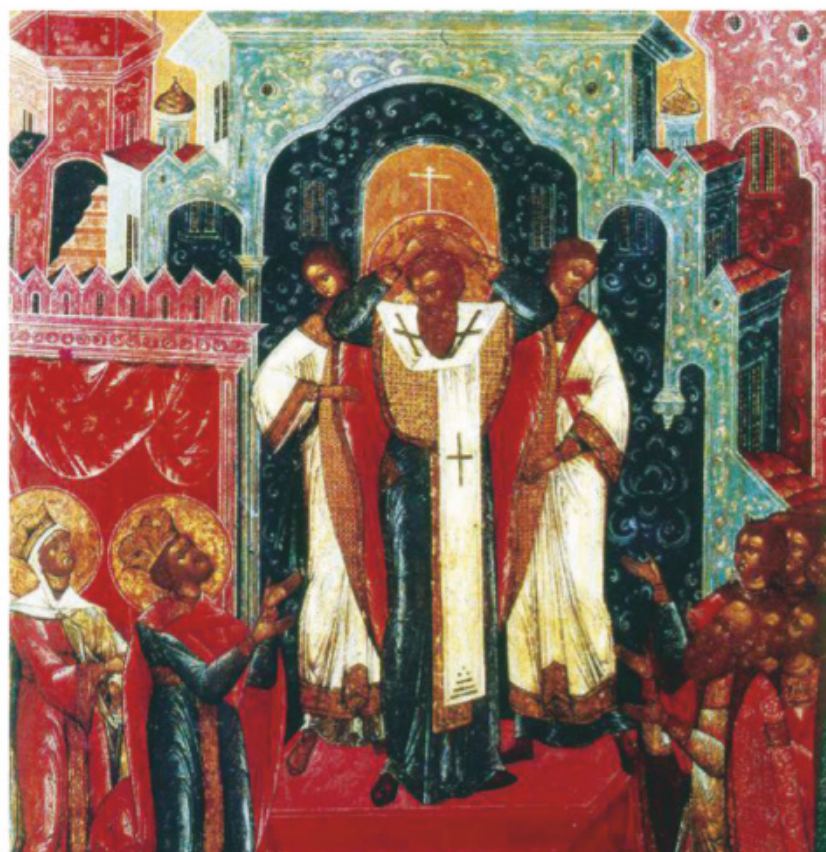
Putin did not embrace this Neo-Eurasianism on becoming president in 2000. He sought a constructive relationship with the United States, began strengthening the state and consolidated power in the Kremlin. However, by the time he returned to office in 2012, Putin increasingly used Eurasianist ideas to provide a historical and cultural explanation of why and how the US (the west) was seeking to weaken Russia. In 2014, he even advised civil servants and politicians to read Eurasianist writers who stressed Russia’s messianic role in world history and the importance of the preservation and restoration of Russia’s historical borders and of the Russian Orthodox Church. Putin also advocates a “managed democracy”, with a stress on patriotism and traditional Russian values. This resulted in a crackdown on foreign-funded NGOs, legislation against “non-traditional” sexual practices and the prohibition of “gay propaganda”.

Time will tell whether Putin has an enduring commitment to Eurasianism, or whether he just recognises the usefulness of a ready-made ideology that provides a handy rationale for his main policy concerns. Putin is pragmatic and understands power; while Eurasianism is useful, he will not abandon it.

Catherine Danks is a senior lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University, specialising in Russian history and politics



Maxim Litvinov, People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs for the Soviet Union, leaves a meeting in 1934 having secured admission to the League of Nations – from which the USSR was expelled in 1939 for invading Finland



GETTY IMAGES

A 19th-century painting of an orthodox church service. In 2014, Vladimir Putin advised civil servants and politicians to read writings that stressed the importance of the preservation of the Russian Orthodox Church

Charlotte Alston

“Soviet leaders engaged in traditional diplomacy but also acted outside it”



The question of whether Russia does, or should, conform to standards set by western Europe has a long history. In the 19th century, Russian statesmen and thinkers articulated competing visions of what Russia and its empire ought to be. Should it aim to emulate western ‘civilisation’? Or should it embrace its own traditions, and be a leader in its

own sphere? At key moments in Russia’s history – in the revolutionary year of 1917, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 – western observers expected Russia to follow a path towards westernisation and democratisation. On both occasions they were disappointed.

Even when Russia took its own path, as the leading Slavic/orthodox power in the 19th century or as the world’s first socialist state in the 20th, it did so with one eye on the west. Industrial development under Stalin was accompanied by rhetoric about keeping up with, and overtaking, established industrial powers. The same was true of scientific and cultural achievements during the Cold War. Throughout the life of the Soviet Union, its leaders both engaged in traditional diplomacy (through alliances in wartime, or the League of Nations in peacetime) and acted outside it (through revolutionary diplomacy and support for communist parties abroad).

Another long-standing feature of the relationship between Russia and western Europe was the presence across the 19th and 20th centuries of a Russian political emigration. In the late 19th century, Russian revolutionaries organised and campaigned abroad against the tsarist regime. In the 1920s, opponents of the early Soviet regime campaigned in foreign capitals. In the later 20th century, dissident literature shaped western understandings of the Soviet system. Such networks were closely monitored by the Russian government. In the late 19th century, the Okhrana (tsarist secret police) office in Paris kept an eye on revolutionaries in London; in the 1920s, the GPU (Soviet secret police)-sponsored ‘Trust’ manipulated opponents abroad. Evidently, there are stark economic and political differences between today’s Russian émigré oligarchs and the revolutionary or counter-revolutionary emigrations of earlier decades, just as there are between Vladimir Putin’s Russia and earlier regimes. But the question of how Russia relates to its western counterparts is an enduring one.

Charlotte Alston is professor of history at Northumbria University

Evan Mawdsley

“Those in charge of the Russian state have felt insecure in a way that the leaders of ‘normal’ governments have not”



The question assumes that there are rules, and that some states are ‘normal’ and others are not; both assumptions are questionable. What follows, however, accepts that Russia *has* behaved in a fundamentally dissimilar way from other major European countries and the United States, and suggests some reasons why this has been the case.

The issue of ‘playing by the rules’ arose immediately after 1945, when western governments struggled to explain Soviet Russia’s abrupt reversal of its wartime re-integration into the international system. Without following too closely the 1946 analysis of the “sources of Soviet conduct” by US diplomat George Kennan, several related factors can be identified that have kept it acting as an outsider for nearly 75 years, including over 25 years of the post-Soviet Russian Federation (RF).

First of all, Russia was for much of its history cut off from the outside world, and when the state did modernise (under the communists) the new state made every effort to control and limit contact. This is an area where the RF differs considerably from the USSR, but Vladimir Putin and the current generation of leaders were brought up within the Soviet mindset.

In addition, those in charge of the Russian state have, throughout this period, felt insecure in a way that the leaders of ‘normal’ governments have not. The catastrophe of German invasion and occupation in 1941–45, and the existential crisis that came with the collapse of the USSR in 1991, have no parallel. The ongoing sources of insecurity include popular dissatisfaction with economic conditions, and ethnic conflict in a geographical space with many conflicting identities.

Contemporary Russia is probably weaker in geographical, demographic, economic, military and diplomatic terms than at any time in the past century. In dealing with this fearful situation, the government in Moscow has had the advantage over its international rivals of its institutional strength relative to Russian civil society. Both under the communists and under their successors, there were few checks on what the Russian state could do – it has made up its own rules. 🌐

Evan Mawdsley was professor of international history at the University of Glasgow. His books include *World War II: A New History* (Cambridge University Press, 2009)

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The ancient template of antisemitism

The historical roots of this prejudice are as enduring and pervasive as they are irrational

BY DEBORAH LIPSTADT



A yellow star badge, which Jews were forced to wear in most of Nazi-occupied Europe during the Second World War

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Recently, a well-educated man – the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, one of America’s most successful corporate entities – attended a seminar I gave on antisemitism. After my presentation, he asked in a perplexed tone: “Jews are so smart... How is it that they have not been able to solve this problem of antisemitism?”

I told him that his question was aimed in the wrong direction. He should not be asking the victim of prejudice to solve the problem – he should be asking the perpetrator. The purveyors of this hate and hostility should be the ones who bear the onus of having to resolve the issue. Of course, the perpetrators would have a ready answer: they would fall back on the stereotypes they use to justify their prejudices. Ultimately, they would blame the victim.

But that was not the only thing wrong with his query. There is no easy solution to prejudice because it is an irrational sentiment. The etymology of the word itself is testimony to its irrationality: to pre-*judge*, to decide what a person’s qualities are long before meeting the person themselves. The purveyor of prejudice encounters the stereotype even when the actual person is not present. Stereotypes exist independently of an individual’s actions. That does not mean that a member of the group in question is immune from possessing the negative characteristics ascribed to the entire group. But when an individual’s wrongdoings are seen as characteristic of an entire group, because ‘that is how *they* are,’ we have entered the realm of prejudice.



The futility of trying to debunk prejudicial claims with rational explanations was illustrated for me when I was co-teaching a course on the Holocaust. I was enumerating for the class the various claims made by Nazis about Jews, among which was that Jews use their nefarious skills to control world economies. According to Nazis, the Jews were responsible for Germany’s financial woes.

During my lecture, a student raised her hand and said: “But all the German bankers and lawyers *were* Jews, weren’t they?” I intuited from her tone that she was suggesting that maybe the Nazis were justified in their claim – that maybe Jews did wreak havoc with the German economy, and that they used the law to shield themselves from the consequences. In an almost breathless



AKG IMAGES

A stereotype of a wealthy, ‘untrustworthy’ Jew in an antisemitic German picture book of 1936

Antisemitism has characteristics that set it apart from other hatreds

rush, I began to flood her with details and statistics chosen to demonstrate that the answer was an emphatic 'no'. I pointed out that many leading banks in Germany were owned by non-Jews. I cited the wide range of other professions practised by Jews (cattle dealers, teachers, artisans and so on). I pointed out that there were fewer than 600,000 German Jews in a population of 60 million. I continued to pile statistic on top of statistic, fact upon fact.

In the midst of my response, my co-instructor approached the lectern. I was a bit taken aback, because we had agreed that we would not interrupt one another during the lectures. Turning to the student, she quietly but emphatically said: "So what?" Then, after a long pause, she continued: "So what if the banking or legal systems were controlled by people who were Jews [which they weren't]? Would that have been a legitimate reason to hate all Jews, assume mendacious goals on their part and, ultimately, to attempt to annihilate an entire people? And what about those Jews – the majority of German Jewry – who had nothing to do with financial or legal institutions? Why should they be held responsible? Should non-Jewish bankers and lawyers also be held collectively responsible for Germany's economic woes?"



Rather than my fact-laden jumble, her "so what?" was the correct response. The student had asked a question that was rooted in a false premise: that Jews, as a people, aim to control the world's economies – and, ipso facto, any Jew involved in banking or any other financial activity is part of this conspiratorial effort and must have diabolical aims. By citing facts and figures, I had responded to an irrational proposition in a rational fashion, thereby giving the assertion on which her question was founded the gravitas it did not deserve. It would be akin to responding to the racist's charge that "black people are intellectually inferior" with a list of black people who had attended the best universities. The answer from my colleague (who happened to be a non-Jew, a former nun) revealed antisemitism's fundamental irrationality.

The fact that the question was asked by a Jewish student, who had told me how much she abhorred antisemitism, exposed its ubiquitous character and long reach. In fact, one of the most deleterious effects of prejudice is revealed when the member of the group being stereotyped believes that the stereotypes are true.

Antisemitism is a prejudice, and shares many of the characteristics of prejudice in general, particularly in the realm of stereotyping, but has certain characteristics that set it apart from other hatreds. First, it is a conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theorists find 'culprits' to blame for something they oppose or find threatening. Those who subscribe to these theories tend to rely on familiar 'enemies' – for example, Jews, not bicycle riders or left-handed people – to give an intentional explanation for events that may seem inexplicable. By picking a familiar or common enemy, their claims seem rational to the person who has heard these charges before.



Survivors at Auschwitz concentration camp, pictured on 27 January 1945 during the arrival of the Red Army. Six million Jews were killed by the Nazis



The Descent from the Cross, by Peter Paul Rubens, c1617. The New Testament account of the crucifixion of Jesus formed one of the building blocks of antisemitism

Conspiracy theorists reflexively reject facts that contradict their narrative. These theories have an internal coherence – what researchers have described as a “self-sealing quality” – that makes them “particularly immune to challenge”. Logic falls by the wayside and exaggerations, suspicions and stereotypes predominate. Unlike my student in that lecture, the committed antisemite will not be dissuaded by a demonstration that they are subscribing to something irrational.

Antisemitism is delusional, ascribing to Jews contradictory qualities. For example, according to antisemites Jews are both capitalists and communists. Antisemites accuse Jews of being clannish and sticking together and, at the same time, charge them with being pushy and wanting to be accepted in circles that have no desire to accept them. It is impossible to simultaneously be a communist *and* a capitalist, pushy *and* clannish. But that is logic. And prejudice defies logic.

Antisemitism is not random. It is not disliking a Jew. It is disliking someone *because* they are a Jew. It has a structure and it is persistent. It is with good reason that it has been called the ‘longest’ or ‘oldest’ hatred. Its roots can be found in the New Testament and the story of the crucifixion of Jesus, but hostility towards Jews did not begin with the rise of Christianity. During the Hellenistic period, Jews were often persecuted in places such as Alexandria, Egypt. Jews’ disdain for the multiple pagan gods and insistence on separate dietary and social customs did not win them favour in the eyes of their Hellenistic contemporaries. That hostility, however, was more akin to the natural resentment people often feel towards a group that refuses to accept the dominant practices of the times.



Early church fathers, though probably influenced by Hellenistic attitudes, put their own enduring stamp on this hatred. They elevated their antipathy towards Jews to a fundamental aspect of Christian tradition. It is in the New Testament’s depictions of the death of Jesus that we find the building blocks of millennia of antisemitism. Irrespective of the fact that everyone involved in the story was Jewish – except for the Romans who did the actual crucifixion – the way the story has been told by generations of church leaders is that ‘the Jews’ are responsible for the death of Jesus, having demanded that the Romans crucify him. In so doing, they deprived humanity of his wisdom, goodness and glory. The Jews, the New Testament tells us, wanted Jesus killed because he had evicted the money changers from the Temple in Jerusalem, charging that they were demeaning the holiness of the Temple and cheating the poor. Evicting them threatened the income of the Temple hierarchy, and they demanded that the Jews’ legislative body, the Sanhedrin, condemn Jesus to death. The Roman ruler, Pontius Pilate, did not wish to carry out the sentence but the Jews insisted that he do so – crying, according to the New Testament: “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

Herein lies the essential elements of the antisemitic template: finances (the money changers), power (getting the Roman authorities to change their mind), intellect (the ability to engineer the death of the son of God). Any antisemitic charge will include one or more of these elements, and will suggest that Jews continue to use their finances, power and intellect in a nefarious and mendacious way.

The church had both a theological and an institutional motivation in turning the Jews into not just a competitor to the new faith, but also an eternal and dangerous enemy. Christianity and Judaism initially were 'sister' religions. Eventually, Christianity considered itself to have superseded or replaced Judaism as a superior religion. Much to the surprise, disappointment and anger of Church fathers, the Jews did not accept this revelatory new religion, despite the fact that it freed its adherent from a life consumed by the observance of many rules and regulations. Paul, contrasting Judaism with the enlightened new faith, declared that a "man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" and that for Jesus "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision accomplishes anything". Pauline doctrine stipulated that Christianity was now the only true faith. Jews were not just marginalised but seen as wilfully blind to the truth of the new faith.

By the Middle Ages, Judaism had been rendered no longer just a competing religion but a font of evil and a danger to Christians. Christian anti-Judaism of the medieval period added a litany of additional accusations. Jews were charged with committing ritual murder, poisoning the wells to spread the Black Death, profaning the 'host' (consecrated bread used in mass), engaging in sorcery and magic, and an array of other evil acts, all of which had the objective of harming non-Jews.



The striking aspect of antisemitism is the way it migrated out of the confines of the church and was adopted and adapted by those who were not only not affiliated with the church but were opposed to it. In the 17th century, Voltaire, an arch-opponent of the church, said of the Jews that "You have surpassed all nations in impertinent fables, in bad conduct and in barbarism. You deserve to be punished, for this is your destiny." Karl Marx, a critic of all religions, echoed those same accusations. Adolf Hitler and the National Socialists propagated the same hatred. The source of the hatred may have changed but the nature of the charges remained the same.

One of the most enduring and widely circulated antisemitic texts is *The Protocol of the Elders of Zion*, which has been greatly responsible for reinforcing the notion of a Jewish conspiracy. Purportedly the record of late-19th century deliberations of an unnamed group of Jewish 'elders', the *Protocols* 'documents' their intentions to control the world, its economies and its political systems. In fact it began life as a mid-19th-century tract that had nothing to do with Jews. Significant portions of the

Protocols were drawn from Maurice Joly's 1864 *Dialogue aux enfers entre Machiavel et Montesquieu* (*Dialogue in Hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu*). Joly's work was written as a political satire, attacking Napoleon III as someone who planned to rule the world. Jews were nowhere to be found in it. When self-described

Jews burned alive in Bavaria, depicted in a 15th-century illustration. During the Middle Ages Jews were accused of spreading diseases including the Black Death



ALAMY

By the Middle Ages, Judaism was no longer just a competing religion but a font of evil





Graffiti on a poster in London, 2015. Holocaust deniers believe that “Jews used their power to compel Germany to accept responsibility for this massive crime,” says Deborah Lipstadt

Holocaust deniers have no evidence, no witnesses, no narrative and no facts to support their claims

mystic Russian Sergei Nilus published the first full version early in the 20th century (he subsequently reissued many other editions), the central characters had become Jews who were determined not only to dominate non-Jews but also to corrupt their morals. Car magnate Henry Ford later published half a million copies in English, and distributed them widely in the early 1920s.

In 1921 *The Times* of London exposed the *Protocols* as an anachronistic forgery, yet the publication continued – and still continues – to have a life of its own. Over the course of the 20th century, this forgery has been republished in German, French, Arabic and an array of other languages. It was used by Nazis to justify their antisemitic campaign. Teachers in the Third Reich used it as a historical document. Today, in addition to becoming an element in anti-Israel attacks, it is broadly available throughout the world, including on Amazon. It reinforces all the conspiracy theories that have been the fulcrum upon which antisemitic hatred pivots.



A

more recent iteration of antisemitism is Holocaust denial. Though deniers have no evidence, no witnesses, no narrative and no facts to support their claims, they assert that Jews were able to plant evidence, doctor documents, arrange for ‘survivors’ to give false testimony, and convince the Allies to hold war crimes trials that falsely charged defendants with having committed genocide.

According to the deniers’ scenario, Jews used their power to compel Germany to accept responsibility for this massive crime, to bear a moral and financial burden, to pay billions in reparations to these ‘non-existent’ victims, their families and Jewish organisations. In addition, they have compelled the world to give them a state. In this ‘explanation’ of why the Jews have created this myth, once again the antisemitic template emerges: money (reparations), power (forcing the world to give Jews a state) and nefarious intellect (being able to pull off such a massive hoax). The Germans and Palestinians – if not the entire world – were the victims of this putative hoax.

Today we see antisemitism emerging from both the political right and the left. On the left, the UK Labour Party has faced accusations of overt antisemitism within its ranks and of discounting the complaints from their Jewish members regarding the situation.

Many progressives consider prejudice to be a function of power – that those who possess power cannot possibly be victims. This view of prejudice is refracted through a prism that has two facets: class and race. Someone who is wealthy or from a group that is considered wealthy, and someone who is white or from a group that is considered white, cannot be a victim. When Jews claim to be victims, these progressives dismiss their claims as invalid and as a means of subterfuge designed to deflect attention from other issues – for example, Israel.

Once again, it's implied, Jews have engaged in their devious ways, using trickery and false accusations to accomplish their goals.

On the right, antisemitism comes from extremists and populists who, in contrast to those on the progressive left described here, do not consider Jews to be white. These white supremacists believe that they are being subjected to a genocide of white Christians. Refugees, people of colour and others who are less talented and accomplished are pushing them out of their jobs and their positions. The only rational way they have of explaining this development is that someone is engineering their 'replacement'. They find that culprit in 'the Jew' – who, as usual, acts in subterfuge, pulling the strings behind the scene.

This is what the marchers in the Charlottesville white supremacist rally in 2017 meant when they chanted: "Jews will not replace us." It is why the shooter in Pittsburgh, who killed 11 at a synagogue in October 2018, said that he wanted all Jews to die: because they were committing genocide against his (white) people. When Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, a rightwing nationalist, wanted to win political support, he launched an attack on George Soros, a billionaire Hungarian-American Jew and Holocaust survivor who has funded pro-democracy and human rights groups in many former Soviet-bloc countries, including Hungary. Orbán's campaign included billboards erected throughout Hungary bearing a picture of a smiling Soros and the caption: "Let's not allow George Soros to have the last laugh." US president Donald Trump also cast Soros as the enemy when he accused him of facilitating the "swarm" of migrants trying to cross America's southern border.

Whether such charges come from right or left, they rely on the same themes: the nefarious Jew, manipulating matters behind the scene, acting to his own advantage and to the detriment of the non-Jew, particularly the white Christian.



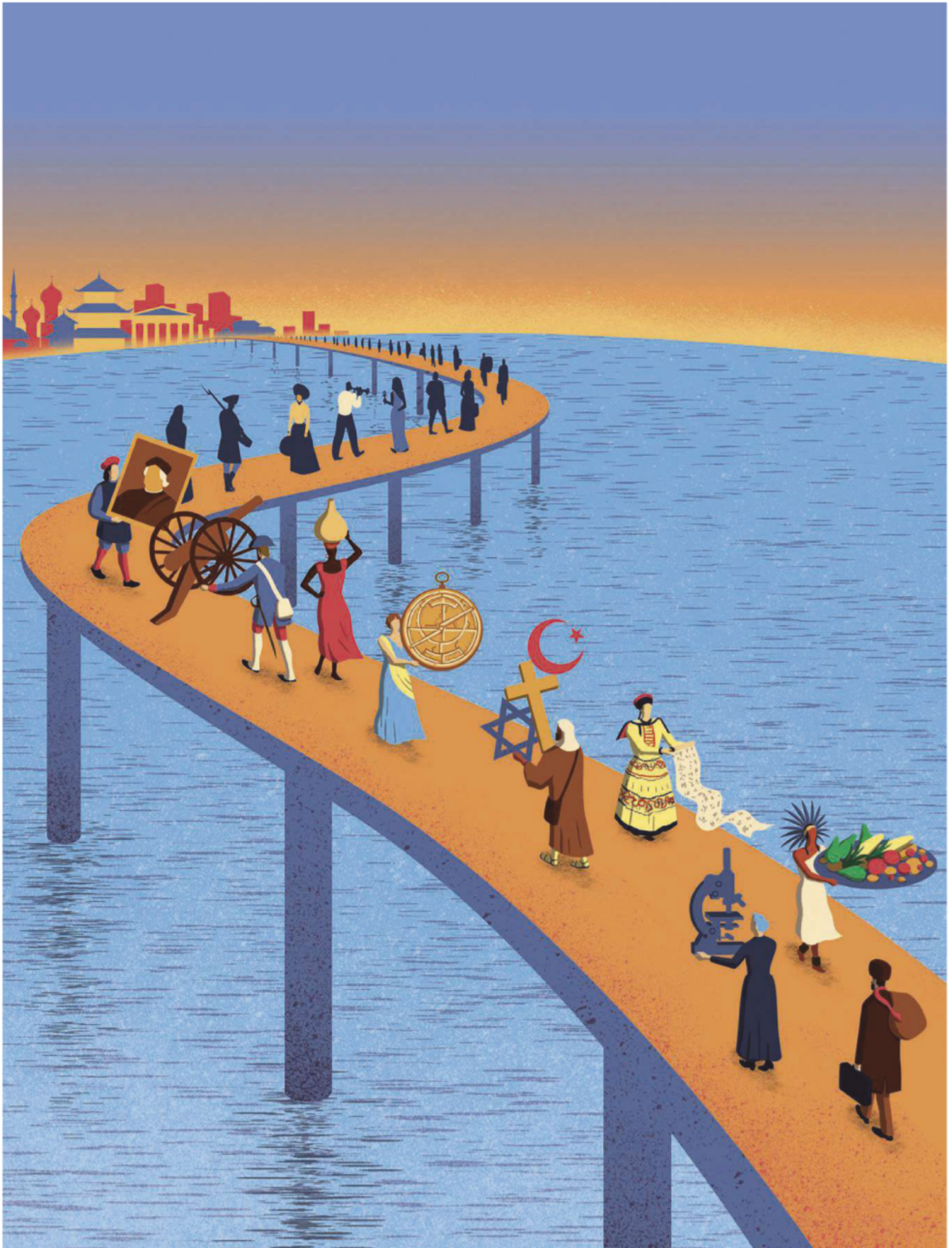
Ultimately, the hatred that is anti-semitism can best be compared to a herpes virus – a disease that cannot be cured. Just like this virus, it mutates and presents in different ways and in different parts of the body. Medication may ease the symptoms; however, in its essence it remains the same, always lurking beneath the surface, ready to emerge at a time of stress. So, too, with antisemitism. It has taken vastly different forms. And it persists.

What, then, can we do about it? If it is irrational, must we simply throw up our hands in defeat? I think not. We must expose its conspiratorial, irrational and delusional nature. We must challenge others who engage in it. We must familiarise ourselves with its history and understand the terrible consequences of ignoring it. There are no easy correctives, no magic pills, no silver bullets. This fight might be one that can never result in total victory. The roots of this hatred may be too deeply embedded to ever be fully eradicated. However, we must act as if we will be able to achieve that victory. The costs of not doing so are too great. 🌐

Protesters gather in Parliament Square, London on 26 March 2018, amid accusations of antisemitism within the Labour party



Deborah Lipstadt is Dorot Professor of modern Jewish history and Holocaust Studies at Emory University, Georgia. Her books include *Antisemitism Here and Now* (Scribe, 2019)



How has migration changed the world?

Throughout human history, men and women have travelled across continents and oceans, in search of opportunities, seeking refuge from war and persecution, or transported as slaves. Seven experts discuss the impacts these people had on the places they settled – and the lands they left behind

Robert Garland

“Migration was central to growth and sustainability for both ancient Greek and Roman civilisations”



According to United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) figures, as of June 2018 there were 68.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide.

An unprecedented crisis? Hardly. Though the scale was much smaller in antiquity, proportionately the suffering was just as great. Before the Persian invasion of Greece in 480 BC, the Athenians

evacuated some 100,000 women, children, elderly and slaves to the Peloponnese and islands off the coast of Attica. When the Athenians finally arrived at their destinations, there were no medical services, no reception centres, no aid workers, no supplies of clothing, bedding or clean water to greet them. The evacuees returned to their homes to find them burned down – not once but twice. Had the Persian invasion been successful, they would have been either enslaved or massacred.

Both Greek and Roman civilisations were dependent upon the movement of displaced persons, though they rarely feature in ancient accounts, largely because no one much cared. The Greeks exported their surplus population around the Mediterranean. When the island of Thera (now called Santorini) experienced a severe famine, it sent an expedition to Libya. The enterprise failed, and the would-be settlers sailed home. However, on their return their compatriots pelted them with rocks and ordered them not to land – such was the extremity of their hunger. Sending out boatloads of refugees has always been a hazardous enterprise and then as now, no doubt, many thousands perished at sea.

By contrast, Rome’s rapid demographic growth depended on an influx of foreigners, many of them refugees. Romulus, its first king, established an asylum on the Capitoline Hill “to which a mixed rabble, some free – others servile – fled from the neighbouring communities eager for new opportunities,” as the historian Livy put it.

Greek civilisation spread because of the willingness of its population to be displaced, whereas Roman civilisation grew because of the willingness of its population to accept outsiders. Migration was thus central to the growth and sustainability of both civilisations – a readiness to migrate and a readiness to host. That is no less true for the growth and sustainability of modern societies.

Robert Garland is the Roy D and Margaret B Wooster Professor of the Classics at Colgate University, New York

Martin Pitts

“The real global migrants with lasting impacts were often the objects that travelled with people in the Roman empire”



Migrants had a huge impact on the success and longevity of the Roman empire. The urbanisation of a peripheral province such as Britannia would have been impossible without high levels of human mobility. Migrant communities settled several of Britain’s first cities, notably London, Colchester and York. The Roman system depended on soldiers,

colonists and their families from the breadth of the empire, living in new settlements on confiscated land – as illustrated by the tombstone of centurion Marcus Favonius Facilis, one of the first Romans of Italian descent who we know died near the new veteran colony of Colonia Claudia Victricensis (Colchester) shortly after the invasion of AD 43. He had gone to the trouble of importing his tombstone all the way from the Rhineland, where his legion was previously based.

However, the real global migrants with lasting impacts were often the objects that travelled with people, illustrated by three cremations excavated at Roman Exeter, which was established in AD 55 as a legionary fortress and initially inhabited by men of largely Italian origin. The first grave (AD 55–70) contained objects typical of cemeteries at legionary bases across Europe, such as red-gloss terra sigillata pottery and glass vessels. The cups and plates in such graves were at the forefront of a Roman consumer revolution, and were essential in the spread of new dining practices throughout Britannia.

Another grave of the same period contained an unusual decorated beaker but no sigillata, instead resembling the graves of local communities some 200 miles away in Essex and even farther afield in northern Gaul. These selections highlight the culturally diverse customs of the Roman military, and may indicate that the grave belonged to a Gallic auxiliary soldier.

A third grave dates from AD 70–90, after the Roman army had left. Revealing the influx of local people in the city’s population, the grave includes a locally made Durotrigan-style bowl but also lots of terra sigillata plates and cups, illustrating the uptake of globalised practices and the influence of migration even after the military had moved on.

Martin Pitts is associate professor in Roman archaeology at the University of Exeter, and author of *Globalisation and the Roman World: World History, Connectivity and Material Culture* (Cambridge, 2015)



Roman soldiers set up camp, as depicted in a scene from Trajan's column. "The Roman system depended on soldiers, colonists and their families from the breadth of the empire," explains Martin Pitts



Kwame Nkrumah, first president of independent Ghana, dances with Queen Elizabeth II in 1961. Nkrumah's time studying in the US and UK informed his later efforts to win independence for his country

Sumita Mukherjee

"Anti-colonial struggles and fights for universal human rights in the 20th century were shaped by migration"



Enforced migration underpinned much change. Transatlantic slavery involved the enforced displacement of African men, women and children. In addition, after the abolition of slavery an estimated 3.5 million Indians were forced into indentured bondage and displaced to colonial plantations in the Caribbean, Africa and parts of the Pacific. The labour of African slaves, indentured Indians and

Chinese workers shaped the infrastructures and economies of so much of the world, through the building of railways and roads, and through the wealth generated through their plantation labour.

But how do we measure change? The original question implies that change is easy to measure and easy to notice. Change does not just take place because 'great individuals' shape history. How do we measure the stealth of migration – the long-term changes that migrant communities have influenced, shaping language, food, music and other forms of culture? How do we measure shifts in social attitudes over time?

Migration shaped European empires and the nature of imperial conquest in the 18th and 19th centuries. Colonial officials, military officials, merchants, missionaries and labourers from Europe were involved in migrations to colonise various parts of the world, through trade, conquest or settlement. Communities were changed in many ways through contact with these European migrants, not least through decimation or subjection.

But imperial migration was not one-way. Migration also helped to eventually dismantle empires. Anti-colonial struggles and fights for universal human rights in the 20th century have been shaped by migration. Many leaders of anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa started their political careers as students in European or American universities. Feminist struggles were similarly shaped by migrants.

Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta and Jawaharlal Nehru had formative student experiences in Britain that they brought to the nationalist struggles in Ghana, Kenya and India, respectively. Migration has been hugely beneficial for aspiring political leaders through the centuries – in meeting new people, in learning about different societies and cultures, in communicating important messages, and in realising how connected we are as human beings, whatever our background.

Sumita Mukherjee is senior lecturer in history at the University of Bristol, and author of *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks* (Oxford University Press, 2018)



David Abulafia

“The greater the mix of peoples, the more cities have flourished culturally and economically”



We are all migrants, at least by descent. The ‘racial purity’ preached by the Nazis has no biological foundation whatsoever. Studies of the human genome reveal that every population consists of a mixture – even, beyond sub-Saharan Africa, a mixture with our Neanderthal cousins.

Two groups of migrants can be distinguished. On the one hand, we have peoples who have moved en masse, such as the Germanic peoples who invaded the Roman empire (and were themselves a great ethnic mix), or the enormous wave of European settlers in the Americas, or the vast numbers of African slaves transported to the Americas over several centuries in vile conditions.

The arrival of the Germanic invaders caused the breakdown of the old political, social and economic order as these newcomers established their own kingdoms from the fifth century AD onwards. These became the basis for several of the states we recognise today: the Franks in France, the Angles and Saxons in England. Yet this was a complex legacy – the marriage of Roman and Germanic cultures – as is revealed by the survival in Spain, Italy and France of languages based on Latin, not German.

The second group of migrants consists of small groups of merchants who transformed the economy of places they settled. Beginning with the ancient Phoenicians around 900 BC, the Mediterranean – from Lebanon to beyond the Strait of Gibraltar – became an integrated trading zone. The Phoenicians shipped silver and copper from Spain and elsewhere to the Middle East, and they also transformed north Africa by founding a flourishing and famous city at Carthage, near modern Tunis. These exploits were repeated across the millennia by others who brought their business skills to every city in the Mediterranean: Genoese, Venetians, Portuguese Jews, Armenians, and so on.

The greater the mix of peoples, the more the world’s cities have flourished culturally and economically. The simple answer to the question ‘how have migrants changed the world?’ is that migrants have *made* the world.

David Abulafia is emeritus professor of Mediterranean history at Cambridge University. His book *The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Oceans* (Allen Lane, 2019) won the 2020 Wolfson History Prize

Meleisa Ono-George

“Enslaved people, working under brutal conditions, helped generate individual wealth and fuel Britain’s national industrialisation”



When people consider the Anglo-Caribbean region and migration, they may think only of postwar migration of Caribbean people to Britain – the Windrush generation. However, from the first English settlement in the region, the Caribbean has been both the destination for and source of migrant labour from across the British empire and the world.

English colonial involvement in the region from the 1620s ensured a steady flow of migrants to the Caribbean in search of opportunity and a better life for themselves and their families. With few such opportunities at home, indentured labourers from the British Isles moved to the region to work on tobacco plantations in hopes of achieving some wealth after a short contract. As sugar plantations developed in the mid-17th century, opportunities for indentured European labourers declined as they were replaced by forced migrants – enslaved people from the African continent.

Enslaved people worked under brutal conditions but, by their labour, helped generate incredible wealth for individuals and fuelled national industrialisation in Britain. The introduction of enslaved labour did not stop British migration to the region. Many men (and rather fewer women) migrated to the Caribbean with the intention of exploiting the opportunities that developed throughout the 18th century around sugar production, hoping to make their own fortunes.

But migration to and from the Anglo-Caribbean was not just from Europe or Africa. Following the abolition of slavery in the British Caribbean in 1834, planters sought workers from Asia. Indentured labourers from India and, to a lesser extent, China migrated to the region to work plantations throughout the 19th century and into the early 20th century. While many returned at the end of their contracts, many more remained.

Migration, whether forced or free, created large-scale shifts in demographics and the establishment of diaspora communities. These communities have contributed to the culture, ideas and wealth of the countries in which they settled, creating the globalised world that is so familiar to us today.

Meleisa Ono-George is associate professor in Caribbean history at the University of Warwick

Marlou Schrover

“Migrants changed the world when colonising European empires began to enslave, educate, rule and kill others”



Migration history did not start when Syrians left refugee camps after April 2015. Nor did it start with the migrations from the former European colonies to Europe in the postwar decades.

Migrants certainly did change the world when European empires embarked on their colonial projects, and in tandem developed pseudoscientific racist theories on which the colonisers based the right to enslave, educate, rule and kill others.

So when, then, did migration history start? With the arrival of modern humans in Europe 40,000 years ago, replacing and interbreeding with the Neanderthals? That might be too much ground to cover. The truth is that people have always migrated, either to find work, fortune, love or freedom, or because somebody forced them onto a boat, train or plane, or drove them out on foot. There are few people on this planet today who can trace their family tree for three generations without encountering a migrant of sorts.

Migration is as much part of life as marriage, birth and death.

Some of my students in the Netherlands organise US-style baby or bridal showers, but this has nothing to do with large-scale American migration to Europe, and more with growing up watching American sitcoms. Similarly, the popularity of Italian food in north-western Europe since the 1960s was partly connected with the migration of Italian guest-workers – but much more a result of new opportunities for holidays in Italy. For several years the September issue of the glossy monthly magazine *Allerhande*, one of the most popular titles in the Netherlands, presented Italian recipes under headlines such as ‘What shall we eat after our holiday?’, not ‘What our new migrants have to teach us’.

Societies change for a large number of reasons. Dutch peasants stopped eating potatoes with vinegar and coffee for breakfast – immortalised in van Gogh’s painting – because they no longer had to, not because the arrival of migrants changed their world.

Did migration change the world? Of course it did. But technological and economic changes were far more important.

Marlou Schrover is professor in economic and social history with a special interest in migration at Leiden University

James Evans

“The arrival in North America of England’s more ‘vivid people’ was a positive thing for the world”



Otto von Bismarck and Winston Churchill – two figures with very different views on many things – did at least agree on one point in particular: the most important fact in world history is that North America speaks English. From a less lofty vantage point, I think that they were right.

Additionally, the fact that the United States speaks English – a fact that also stands proxy for the defining role of English law and culture – is the single most powerful example of a way in which migrants (the hundreds of thousands of English men, women and children who travelled across the North Atlantic during the 17th century) have changed the world.

Funnily enough, the position of English today as a global language owes little to England but everything to the fact that the US – the world’s most powerful country – speaks it. In a census conducted more than 30 years ago, some 40 million US citizens claimed descent from an English migrant. Today, the total is much larger – and that’s not even considering Canadians. Historians have talked of a “swarming” of the English (the image of bees in a hive has been common in discussions of population), impressed by what they have called a “huge flow of people”. It’s interesting that in the ‘New World’, many words that today seem distinctively American – for example, the use of the word ‘fall’ for the autumn season – were in fact commonly used in 1600s England before falling into disuse in the mother country.

Of course, migrants have not improved things for everyone: the arriving multitudes of Europeans certainly didn’t improve things for the Native American populations they encountered – just as they didn’t for subject populations on numerous other occasions and in many other destinations in colonial history.

They did change things, though, and on balance the arrival in North America of those described as being England’s more “vivid people” – younger, more energetic and determined to improve things for themselves – is a positive thing for the world. I would also argue that, for all the uncertainty that rapid immigration might bring, in postwar England as a whole it has been a positive thing – diversifying its culture, and adding dynamism and a willingness to take on different work in a job market that might otherwise have struggled to adapt to a world that has changed very fast. 🌐

James Evans is a historian, broadcaster and author of *Emigrants: Why the English Sailed to the New World* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2017)



ALAMY

Admiral Horatio Nelson peers across the London skyline from his perch in Trafalgar Square. Activists have called for the statue's removal from its famous column, citing the naval hero's pro-slavery advocacy

Should we judge historical figures by the morals of today?

The removal of monuments to controversial figures has sparked heated debates between politicians and activists. But should we use common moral standards of today as benchmarks by which to judge past behaviour? Six historians explore this contentious topic in this feature from 2017

Andrew Roberts

“If we topple Nelson, what do we do about the pyramids, built at least in part by slave labour?”



Although it is completely illogical, ahistorical and unfair to natural justice to judge the people of the past by today's morals, it is also very hard not to. If we merely judge them by the morals of their own times, that doesn't tell us very much. If we don't judge them morally at all, we let off the likes of Hitler and Stalin in a welter of moral

relativism. Yet because Oliver Cromwell might not have believed in socialised medicine, say, but did believe in slaughtering Roman Catholics in Drogheda at a time when that religion was widely thought to pose an existential threat to Britain, what does that really tell us about him – or them, or us?

The way to approach this minefield is not to assume that our morals are superior to those of the people of the past, because we will indubitably be judged in our turn by our descendants – who will think it truly abhorrent that we allowed children to have mobile phones, or opposed multi-sex lavatories, or appeased Kim Jong-Un when he was so clearly about to incinerate Chicago. Just as we cannot know what we will be indicted for, so Nelson could hardly have known that, two centuries after Trafalgar, there would be calls for him to be toppled from his column because of his (supposed) support for the then-perfectly legal and ancient institution of slavery.

If in our smug, virtue-signalling world we topple Nelson, what do we do about the pyramids, the Parthenon and Rome's Forum, all of which were built at least in part by slave labour? Should Thutmose, Pericles and the Caesars have somehow anticipated that the morals espoused by the likes of the 'Rhodes Must Fall' movement are ultimately more important than their own desires to enter heaven gloriously, laud the goddess Athena and house the Roman senate? Should Winston Churchill be knocked off his plinth in Parliament Square because he was a racist, at a time when almost everybody else – on the left as well as the right – also was? I believe not – and I couldn't care less what my descendants might one day make of it.

Andrew Roberts is visiting professor at the War Studies Department at King's College, London and the Lehrman Institute Lecturer at the New-York Historical Society. His books include *Churchill: Walking with Destiny* (Allen Lane, 2018)

Charlotte Riley

“It is completely appropriate to critique those figures from the past whose morals fall short of our own values”



On one hand, it is true that a historian's primary aim is rarely to make a moral balance sheet of the past. Our work is about interpreting primary sources, thinking about how people behaved and why they acted the way that they did. We do not often set out to write a list of history's biggest villains, judged by our own standards. And it can sometimes feel

reductive to point out, for example, every instance of sexism in the past; it shouldn't be a startling revelation that historical figures held values that were different from our own.

Despite this, however, I am wary of the idea that people from the past should escape our moral judgement. Historians can never approach the past as neutral observers – we all, as historian EH Carr wrote over half a century ago, have a bee in our bonnet about certain issues, and readers of history need to listen for the buzzing. Part of what we bring to our study of the past is our moral framework and, though it is important for us to try to understand figures from the past on their own terms, it is impossible to avoid thinking about them in the context of our values.

This approach is particularly important when we think about figures that might still be celebrated today for their achievements, despite their dodgy moral record. As a historian of the British empire, I feel that it is highly inappropriate for universities with diverse student bodies to have lecture theatres named after Francis Galton, a eugenicist with deeply racist views, or to display statues commemorating and celebrating men such as Cecil Rhodes, who subjugated and oppressed African people as part of British imperial expansion. British imperialism was based on racism, greed and callous violence; and though many profited from imperialism, many also rejected imperial values or resisted imperial subjugation.

It is completely appropriate to critique those figures from the past whose morals fall short of our own values, as well as celebrating those who questioned, critiqued or resisted the systems and beliefs of their time.

Charlotte Riley is lecturer in 20th-century British history at the University of Southampton



Imperialist politician Cecil Rhodes. Charlotte Riley says: “I feel that it is highly inappropriate for universities with diverse student bodies... to display statues commemorating and celebrating such men”



The Great Pyramid and Sphinx at Giza, Egypt. “If in our smug, virtue-signalling world we topple Nelson, what do we do about the pyramids... which were built at least in part by slave labour?” asks Andrew Roberts

Olivette Otele

“We have created grey areas that allow us to ignore sinister sides of human nature”



When asked if people learn from history, humanities experts and scientists acknowledge that studying the past has enhanced our understanding of societies and the motives of people in given situations. The past has taught us, for example, that if a third world war breaks out, there will never be a clear winner. Medical discoveries of the past continue

to save lives to the present day.

We have also learned that, despite the uniqueness of each context, the predictability of our behaviour in given situations implies that we have been conditioned to abide by a set of societal rules. These rules have become our principles. These morals do not obey the confines of time and places. They have become acceptable learned behaviours transmitted from generation to generation. They have even been tested by examples of the past.

Yet asking whether we should judge people of the past by today’s morality implies that morals are like the tides, forever changing, prisoners of the whims of human aspirations. Let us consider two paradoxical examples. A Nazi soldier who participated in the killing of millions of Jews is abhorrent to 21st-century men and women to the extent that, 72 years after the end of the Second World War, Nazi officials are still being brought to justice. Yet many people are reluctant to acknowledge that transatlantic slavery, another deplorable episode in human history, was a failure of morals and a triumph of greed.

We pick and choose who should be held accountable. We have created grey areas that allow us to ignore sinister sides of human nature. “Man is a wolf to man”, as the old Latin proverb has it: a manipulative beast capable of bending his or her own rules and ruthlessly redefining morals to reach his or her goals. In that sense, the present with its imperfections takes precedent over alleged humanist values inherited from centuries of social interaction. Taking the roles of victim and perpetrator, judge and executioner, we have finally granted ourselves the right to question the relevance of our own morals.

Olivette Otele is professor in the history of slavery at the University of Bristol. Her new book *Afro-Europeans: An Untold History* is set to be published in October 2020

Robert Cook

“In general terms today’s morals are not as different from those of the past as some commentators profess to believe”



The question seems to assume that today’s moral code is significantly different from that of previous generations. This is certainly the assumption of people who argue that we shouldn’t judge the British empire or pro-slavery Confederates by ‘today’s morals’.

Leaving aside the thorny issue of defining what these morals are, the chief problem with this line of reasoning is that it lacks a probing historical sensibility and is likely, perhaps wittingly in some cases, to sustain racial oppression in the present.

For the truth, as I see it, is that in general terms today’s morals are not as different from those of the past as some commentators profess to believe. In the 19th century, for example, significant numbers of Britons thought that empire-building was wrong and that slavery was a sin that had to be eradicated.

The controversy over the future of Confederate statues in the United States prompted the defenders of those statues to assert that their removal would mean judging the past by modern standards. In reasoning thus, they ignore the fact that the South’s ‘Lost Cause’ and its associated rituals, symbols and statues have always been controversial and contested in the United States. When Confederate president Jefferson Davis wrote a history of the Confederacy that downplayed the role of slavery in causing the civil war, one Northern reviewer denounced it as “factitious history”. When Southerners raised a huge statue to Robert E Lee in Richmond in 1890, several Republican newspapers denounced the general as a pro-slavery traitor.

As the Lost Cause concept took root during the era of segregation, African-Americans became the strongest opponents of racist statuary. As long ago as the 1920s their opposition played a key role in the decision by congress not to erect a stone tribute to the ‘black mammy’ in Washington DC.

Protesting white supremacy posing as history and heritage is nothing new. We should be wary of its defenders conjuring false dichotomies between past and present morals.

Robert Cook is professor of American history at the University of Sussex, and author of *Civil War Memories: Contesting the Past in the United States Since 1865* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017)

David Abulafia

“Historians are engaged in a sort of battle, trying to rein in the tendency to approve or disapprove of what they see in the past”



Historians like to say that they are impartial, objective, dispassionate. That, of course, is impossible: however hard one tries, all of those writing about the past are influenced by their political outlook, or by current issues such as climate change. This means that historians are engaged in a sort of battle as they tap away at the keys of their laptops, constantly trying to rein in

the tendency to approve or disapprove of what they see in the past. Yet this does not mean that one cannot pass comment on acts or events that defy the values of our own time. What is important is that the writer makes a distinction, clearly declaring his or her voice before returning to the attempt to stand back from events in a non-judgemental way.

Two examples of subjects about which it is perfectly acceptable to express horror in print are the Holocaust and the slave trade. Those who perpetrated the Holocaust cannot hide behind the argument that they operated according to the moral standards of the regime under which they lived, which imagined that it was ‘purifying’ Germany and the world by annihilating Jews and others. In my history of the Mediterranean, *The Great Sea*, I found myself describing the deportation and slaughter of about 43,000 Jews from Salonika in 1943. First, of course, one relates the facts, which are horrifying simply in their narration. But at the end I quoted the poignant words of the Biblical Apocrypha: “some there are who have no memorial,” bearing in mind also that the vast, vanished Jewish cemetery of Salonika now lies underneath the broad campus of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

Writing about the slave trade for the book I am currently completing, I do not think I should hold back from describing as deeply repugnant the trade itself, and the conditions under which slaves were transported across the Atlantic. To be sure, those who sold, transported and bought slaves were practising the moral code of their time, and that has to be explained in a matter-of-fact way. But I hope I do so in a way that separates the plain description of those awful conditions from what are clearly my views, which I invite the reader to share.

David Abulafia is professor of Mediterranean history at Cambridge University. His books include *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (Allen Lane, 2011)



A statue of Confederate General Robert E Lee is removed from its plinth in New Orleans, May 2017. The action sparked a backlash from many Americans who felt that their country's history was being erased



Jews are rounded up in Thessaloniki, Greece, during the Second World War. The majority died in concentration camps – an example of a subject “about which it is perfectly acceptable to express horror,” says David Abulafia

Jonathan Clark

“Many authors think it sufficient to record their moral disapproval of anti-Semitism without explaining how Hitler adopted it”



Historians should do their utmost to encourage people to judge the past by today's morals – but only on the sound Leninist principle that things must get much worse before they get better. Present-centred judgement (let's call it presentism for short) is so widespread that it can easily be made to look

respectable. Polite dissent from this new

orthodoxy is convincingly depicted by presentists as moral partisanship on the wrong side. So presentism must be pushed to its logical conclusion before derision can open the way for historical research.

What is that logical conclusion? Nothing less than that historical enquiry is unnecessary, since presentists already have all the authority they need to hand out moral judgments. But, once satire has highlighted this premise, historians can ask their unwelcome questions: how do the presentists come to have the morals that they do? How do things come to be as they are? Presentism actually prevents answers, even among historians. There are many biographies of Adolf Hitler, for example, some of which reveal that before 1914 his loathing was focused on Jesuits, not Jews. How did he transfer his antipathies to the second? We are not told, because many authors think it sufficient to record their moral disapproval of anti-Semitism without explaining how Hitler adopted it.

We need, instead, more contemporary history, focused on the presentists themselves. How did they become activists? How did they come to think that demolishing statues, or banning books, or persecuting politically incorrect speech, is justified? How did they come to believe that their personal moral values stand for the moral values of their societies? How did they adopt the parochial assumption that their society, even if it has a single morality, can impose it on others around the world? All these are important questions, but they are historical ones. And they show that historians – real ones, that is – are the subversives in the new era of electronic collectivism and anonymous denigration. In a contest between history and moralising, history wins. 🌐

Jonathan Clark is a historian of the long 18th century, and Hall Distinguished Professor of British History at the University of Kansas



Should museums return their treasures?

Amid calls for the 'return' of artefacts such as the Benin Bronzes and art looted by the Nazis during the Second World War, now held in museums far from their places of origin, nine experts discuss the ethical and historical aspects of the 'restitution' of such treasures

Tiffany Jenkins

“The best way to respect people who came before us is to research history without judging it through the eyes of the present”



In the early eighth century, monks at Wearmouth-Jarrow Abbey produced three enormous bibles. Two remained in Northumbria, but only fragments of one survive. The third travelled with the abbot as he set out to Rome, intending to present it as a gift to the shrine of Peter the Apostle. Known as the Codex Amiatinus, it is in astonishing condition – and is the oldest surviving complete Latin Bible in the world. This monumental text, one of the greatest works of Anglo-Saxon England, is now kept in the Laurentian Library in Florence, beyond Britain’s borders – and a good thing, too. Culture doesn’t have a fixed nationality. It’s not like a person who needs a passport. Though a product of particular time and place, as they move to new locations such artefacts spread knowledge about their origins, the different lives they have touched and meanings they have held.

It’s true that some artefacts were taken in circumstances we now find unpalatable. But history is long and complicated; the situation is always more tangled than ‘baddies’ versus ‘goodies’.

Consider the Parthenon of ancient Athens. Many elements were removed from that monument in modern times, and some (known as the Elgin Marbles) are now displayed in the British Museum, others in Paris and Copenhagen; activists would have them returned to Greece. Yet the Parthenon itself was a display of power, built mostly by slaves. Likewise, though the way British acquired the Benin Bronzes is ugly, the story of their creation, seen through the eyes of the present, isn’t without taint. The glory of Benin was built on the slave trade: the contested Bronzes in European museums were crafted from manillas (metal bracelets used as currency in west Africa) brought by the Portuguese to trade for slaves. It is not possible to repair that past. Nor will judging it through the eyes of the present aid an understanding of ancient Athens or the court of Benin. The best way to respect the lives of the people who came before us is to research and understand history without such an agenda.

We should aim to live in a world where artefacts from other times and places are shared. We should aim to unlock the past, not overturn it. That is what museums are for, and what they do best. That is why they should keep their treasures.

Tiffany Jenkins is the author of *Keeping Their Marbles* (OUP, 2016)

Lissant Bolton

“Objects help relationships between museums and communities worldwide to be created and sustained”



Museums should be (and are being) more transparent about collecting histories. However, discussions about where objects should be situated tend to skirt over the complexity of shared histories and to ignore long-standing effective relationships between curators and heritage professionals working in partnership with museums and communities internationally.

The British Museum is constantly engaged in collaborations with communities who want to document, revive and restore their distinct cultural heritage. Objects provide a point of connection and opportunity that enable those relationships to be created and sustained over time. Those relationships are often also personal: they are not only about connections between institutions but also about connections between curators and community members at different levels. In my own case I have worked for more than 30 years with, and at the invitation of, the Vanuatu Cultural Centre in the South Pacific, supporting the work of women who want to sustain and develop their cultural knowledge and practice.

Some of our most important recent collaborations have developed around our collections from the African continent. For many years our staff have worked with a number of African museums, focusing on exhibition and research collaboration, collection care, infrastructure development and capacity building.

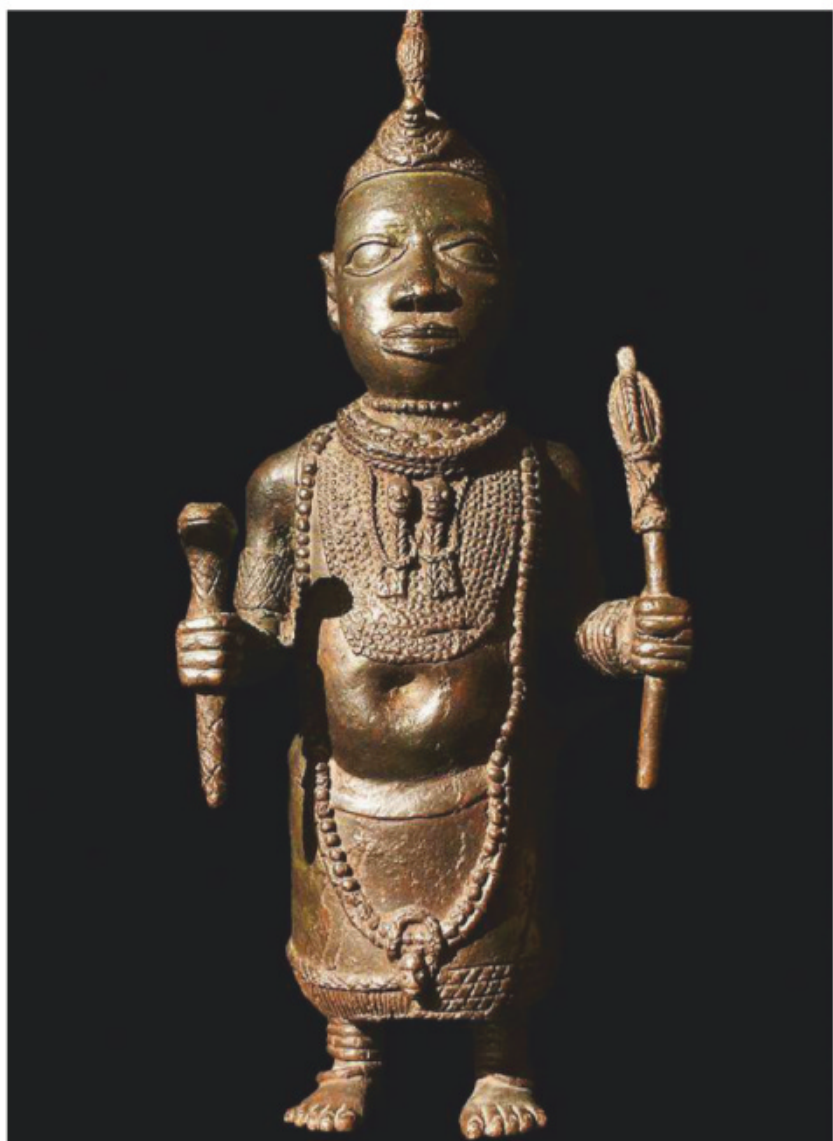
As part of this collaboration, in 2018 our director, Hartwig Fischer, visited both Ghana and Nigeria to meet and support our colleagues there. In particular, he visited Benin City, the centre of the historic Benin empire that is strongly represented in the British Museum collections. During this visit, the Oba [ruler] of Benin talked about the value of having historic collections both in Benin City and across the world to act as ‘cultural ambassadors’ of Benin culture; he also expressed his desire to have some of those collections returned to Benin City (on loan and permanent return).

Working as a member of the Benin Dialogue Group – along with Nigerian and other European museums – the British Museum is supporting the development of the new Benin Royal Museum and has confirmed that it will lend objects to the new museum.

Lissant Bolton is Keeper of the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas at The British Museum



British soldiers with looted artefacts during the punitive expedition to Benin City (now in southern Nigeria) of 1897. Many of these pieces, known as the Benin Bronzes, are held in European museums



BRIDGEMAN

A bronze figure of an Edo king of the Benin empire, which flourished in what's now Nigeria from the 15th century. Several such pieces are being loaned to Nigeria by the British Museum and Paris's Musée du Quai Branly

Marie Rodet

“In exhibitions that pop up in local museums, the history of the artefacts – particularly their looting – is generally invisible”



In November 2018, an influential report was published on the restitution of African cultural heritage in France. A number of experts and museum directors opposed such restitution, in part because they claimed it would empty French museums of collections. The controversy is not new, especially in the UK, where such debates often make headlines.

Much less known are the African and Asian artefacts held by smaller provincial museums across Europe, many of which were donated by semi-public figures or private collectors who took part in the European colonial projects in Africa and Asia in the 19th and 20th centuries. Local museums often lack the expertise or even interest to deal with and preserve these collections. Such artefacts are rarely exhibited and, if they are, their origins, descriptions and history are often displayed inaccurately.

An interesting example of this happened couple of years ago. The local museum in Le Havre displayed a number of artefacts looted by the French General Louis Archinard during the conquest of what later became the colony of French Sudan (now Mali), and which formed part of his private collection donated to the museum nearly a century ago. The exhibition, called Le Havre-Dakar, was a collaboration with Senegalese museums, which lent some pieces. The focus was on the historical and contemporary cultural relationship between France and Senegal, but most of the African pieces exhibited were actually from what is today Mali. Captions provided few details of their origin, and no indication of the context of their acquisition, except for the note ‘collection Archinard’. The exhibition as a whole made little sense for the wider public, because the museum lacked expertise in African studies.

Generally, in such exhibitions that pop up once in a while in local museums, the history of the artefacts (and particularly their looting) is invisible. In this context, the case for their return appears even stronger, enabling appreciation by an audience avid to learn more about their past. Those artefacts that, in a provincial European context, may appear of little value, should be returned to their countries of origin where they can be fully appreciated as real treasures and valuable heritage.

Marie Rodet is senior lecturer in the history of Africa at SOAS University of London



Felipe Fernández-Armesto

“The heritage of humankind can’t be divvied up like a lottery jackpot. Museums are among the best places to share it”



Call it appropriation, if you like, and rage at it in your folly: cultural exchange is the starting point of progress. As people, objects, ideas, products and habits get swapped across the world, they inspire new departures, launch new thoughts and create new ways of life. Without Renaissance *Wunderkammern* there would have been no Scientific Revolution.

Without museums of colonial artefacts, Picasso and Brancusi would have gone on seeing with old-world eyes. No one should be ashamed of having items from elsewhere at home.

Museums are essential for research – to understand objects and texts, you have to be able to compare and contextualise them. Equality in education demands museums; without them, only Grand Tourers would see worldwide wonders.

If you start returning works that communities claim on grounds of ethnic or national emotional investment, you can’t fairly deny any request for repatriation. You condemn museums to pillage more destructive than anything their endowers ever did. Pieces belong wherever they have long resided: they become part of the history of the British Museum, say, as much as of ancient Egypt or 19th-century Nigeria.

The heritage of humankind can’t be divvied up like a lottery jackpot. Museums are among the best places for it to be widely shared. International conventions, subject to a reasonable statute of limitations, rightly forbid museums from garnering the proceeds of filching and looting. But think of Sweden without Christina’s dodgily gotten gains, or Constantinople without the goodies Constantine planted in the Hippodrome, or Venice without the Horses of San Marco.

Spoils of long-ago wars, the cut-price acquisitions of plutocratic treasure-hunters and the injudicious gifts of bygone diplomatic exchange can stay where they are – where they have come to be part of the history not just of their places of origin, but of the world. Do you miss your marbles or pine for your scrolls? Go to where they are gathered and revel in the breadth of admiration on which your supposed ancestors’ skills can draw.

Felipe Fernández-Armesto is the author of books including *Out of Our Minds: A History of What We Think and How We Think It* (OneWorld, 2019)

Bryony Onciaul

“Arguing that repatriation will ruin museums obscures the fact that the opposite can be true”



Museums play an important role in society. They authorise the way we understand ourselves in the world based on our shared histories, founding cultural concepts and imagined futures. Museums also reframe and challenge our assumptions by revealing hidden histories and illuminating different ways of knowing and being. However, many museums can also be criticised as institutions built on colonial foundations.

Calls to return objects to source communities may appear to threaten collections; however, repatriation can actually create opportunities to innovate, decolonise and strengthen museums. Repatriation claims are not wholesale demands to empty stores of treasures; rather, each is a very specific, carefully considered case-by-case request for a particular item that holds significance to a community. Though some requests come from governments, many come from indigenous peoples whose material culture and ancestral remains were sold, taken or traded during colonisation. The argument that repatriation will ruin museums has not only been disproven, it obscures the fact that the very opposite can be true.

When culturally significant materials are returned in a sensitive, responsible manner, new relations can be forged that enhance museums, collections and public understanding. For example, Glenbow Museum in Alberta, Canada repatriated sacred bundles to the Blackfoot First Nations. This created a reciprocal relationship that led to the co-creation of a permanent museum gallery, new acquisitions donated by community members, and innovative curatorial practice.

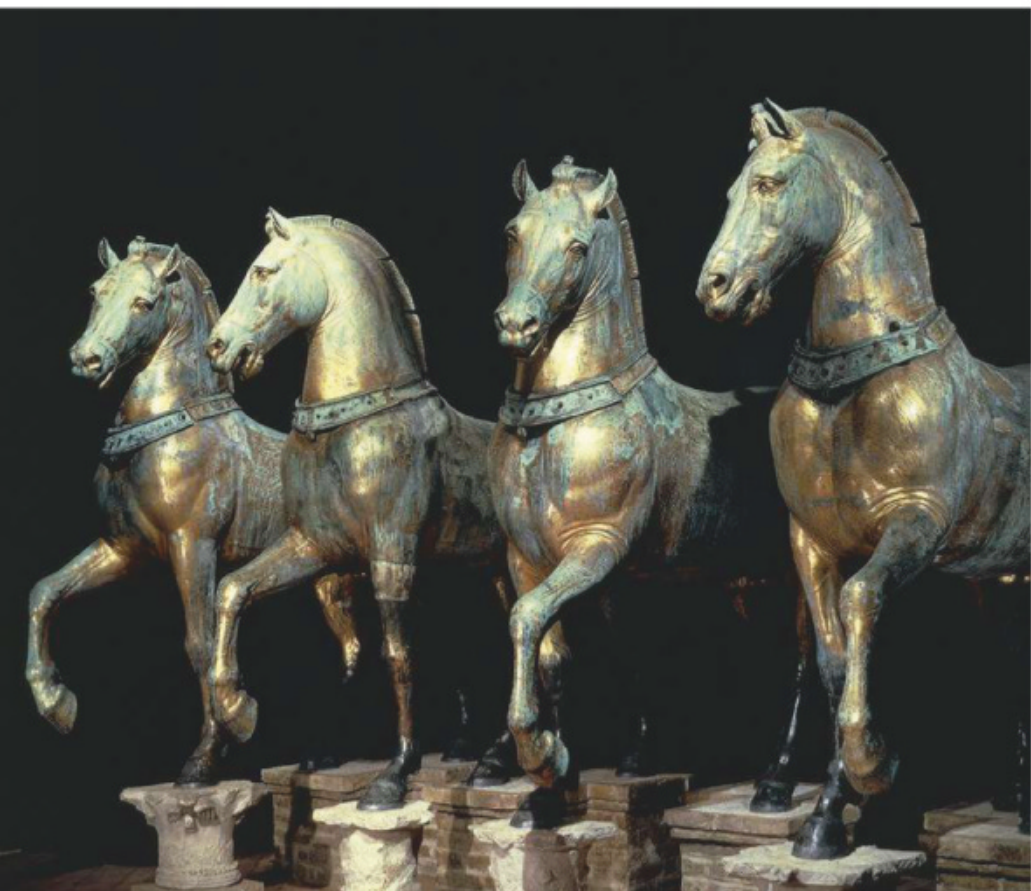
Returning artefacts to source communities helps to maintain tangible and intangible connections to ancestors and homelands, while also potentially rebuilding cultural pride and autonomy after periods of cultural suppression. Repatriation inspires the creation of new items for public display and events that celebrate museum–community relationships.

Hoarding treasures is not enriching. Responding to access and repatriation requests acknowledges our globally intertwined histories, and creates mutually beneficial relations that can revitalise museums, and can deepen our understanding and appreciation of our collective past and future.

Bryony Onciaul is associate professor of museology and heritage studies at the University of Exeter, and author of *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonising Engagement* (Routledge, 2015)



A member of the Blackfoot community in Alberta. The repatriation of sacred bundles by the Glenbow Museum, in the Canadian province of Alberta, to the Blackfoot First Nations created a reciprocal relationship



The Horses of San Marco, looted from Constantinople, at that time capital of the Byzantine empire, in 1204. “Museums are among the best places for heritage to be widely shared – think of Venice without the Horses of San Marco [for example],” writes Felipe Fernández-Armesto

Kehinde Andrews

“This is not a complicated issue: the only ‘right’ to hold these artefacts was the dominion of empire”



The empire may have crumbled, but British colonial arrogance towards the former colonies certainly has not. While colonising a quarter of the globe, Britain stole treasures and artefacts for the British public to marvel at in museums. There simply is no justification for holding on to these stolen goods.

Nigeria has been struggling for decades to get Britain to return the Benin Bronzes, a collection of sculptures and plaques that decorated the palace of the Kingdom of Benin as early as the 15th century. British forces looted the bronzes during an expedition in 1897, and British museums seem to think this gives them a divine right to keep hold of them. Nigeria’s National Commission for Museums and Monuments has become so frustrated that they are now resorting to asking to borrow their own property back.

This is not the only example of the idea of loaning back stolen goods. The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) is proposing to loan back the Maqdala treasures to Ethiopia, which were ‘acquired’ when British troops plundered the kingdom of Emperor Tewodros II in 1868. So great was the theft that it took 15 elephants and 200 mules to move the loot. After refusing Ethiopia’s demands to return the items, including a crown and a wedding dress, the V&A put them on display in 2018 and offered the loan as a ‘compromise’.

In reality this is not a complicated issue. Britain, and other European nations, stole treasures from across the world to display in their museums. Their only ‘right’ to hold these artefacts was the dominion of empire. As much as many people may yearn for an ‘Empire 2.0’, those days are long gone. The continued sense of entitlement is now just a delusion, and Britain and its European neighbours owe restitution to their former colonies in a myriad of ways. Returning some of the proceeds of their crimes to their rightful owners would be a step in the right direction.

Kehinde Andrews is professor of black studies at Birmingham City University and the author of books including *Back to Black: Retelling Black Radicalism for the 21st Century* (Zed Books, 2018)



Olivette Otele

“Many countries in west Africa do not have the facilities to preserve valuable artefacts”



In 2017, French president Emmanuel Macron promised that African artefacts would be returned to the continent. The economic and political dimensions of the decision didn't escape observers. Europe's hold on Africa's natural resources had been under threat for decades, but the focus on culture and art raised eyebrows.

In that context, Macron commissioned historian Bénédicte Savoy and Senegalese economist Felwine Sarr to produce a report on restitution. It recommended that a portion of the 90,000 objects originating from Sub-Saharan Africa currently held in French public collections should be returned to the nations from which they originated – including in the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in Paris. When it opened in 2006, this museum caused a storm of controversy because its presentation of objects from African, American, Asian and Oceanian civilisations omitted any mention of colonial conquests or the way those artefacts had been acquired.

The debate did not, therefore, start with Macron. Yet Macron's initiative has plunged museums into difficult but necessary discussions about the past, and about the historical roles of museums as vehicles of dominant Eurocentric narratives. In Britain, the debate has led to other responses. Lending objects to nations from where they originated was seen as a way forward, but that sparked controversy when the objects in question were obtained through looting, provoking an image of a thief lending his prizes to the owner.

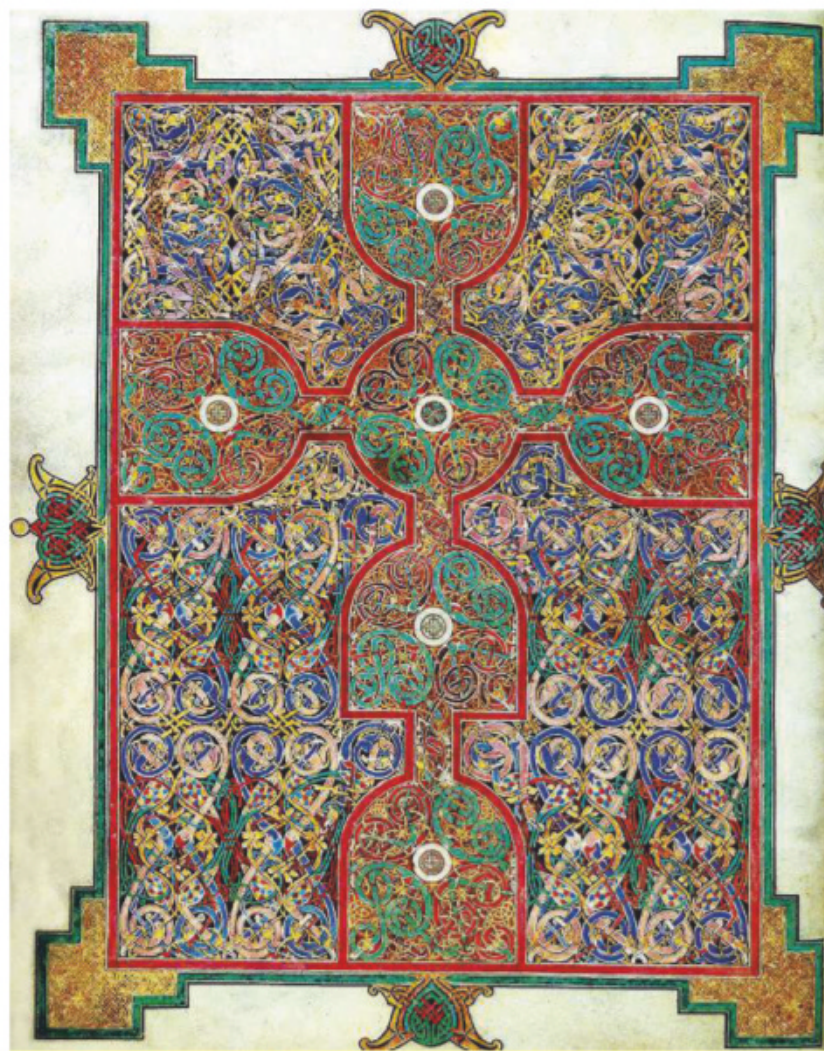
British museums have a staggering number of objects that are not displayed and are unlikely to be seen by museum-goers. Having been evaluated, these objects are now British assets sitting in storage. On the other hand, the Savoy-Sarr report recommended that nations ask for restitution. Many countries in west Africa have not come forward to do so because they do not have the facilities to preserve those valuable artefacts and protect them from theft; new funding would need to be provided to museums already suffering from a lack of government funding.

Nonetheless, in principle, as far as France is concerned these countries are entitled to restitution. In Britain, restitution is still met with resistance. It seems the debate in the UK about decolonising museums is only about diversifying the narrative, not the restitution of artefacts.

Olivette Otele, professor in the history of slavery at Bristol University



Works of art stolen from Jews by the Nazis, stored in Mauerbach Charterhouse, Austria, 1971. The Austrian government made very limited efforts to alert the pre-Third-Reich owners or their families to possible claims to these works, and by 1972 very few had been returned



An illustrated 'carpet page' from the Lindisfarne Gospels, a manuscript produced around 700 AD and currently held in the British Library. Should it be returned to Northumberland?

AKG IMAGES

Simon Jenkins

“Most of the old imperial museums are overstocked, hoarding material in storerooms, never to see the light of day”



This is not going to go away. When someone else has something you think is yours, you want it back. If it was stolen or otherwise illegally obtained, there is no question. It is yours.

The problem with so much museum treasure is that its acquisition was often dubious, and its emotional content often significant. Over time, as countries grow stronger and prouder, this will become ever more political. Newly confident nations will want to recover symbols of their past, whatever their status.

It is no answer for museum directors to plead rules and protocols. They are there to be changed. Great works of world art and archaeology belong to peoples, not to museums. That they are incarcerated, often out of context and far from ‘home’, in vast and sombre mausoleums is itself a sadness. That their seclusion can only be justified by references to visitor numbers or the divine right of scholarship is sadder.

There is an increasing acceptance of the desirability of repatriating ‘crown jewels’ and other works with a peculiar bond to their country of origin, be the artefact in question a skull, a statue, a boat or a dress. It seems absurd to deny Easter Island its evocative *moai* statues, which should be gazing out over the Pacific, or Gibraltar its Neanderthal head. Why in principle should the Lindisfarne Gospels not be in Lindisfarne and the Lewis Chessmen not (all) in Lewis?

If international standards of conservation are agreed, there is no intellectual case for these objects being held abroad, particularly in these days of mass travel and online accessibility. Most of the old imperial museums are overstocked, hoarding material in basements and storerooms, never to see the light of day. There is no conceivable reason for not dispersing these collections.

The objects bequeathed us by the past belong to humanity. At very least they belong to the people whose ancestors created them and understandably want them back. Locking them away in London, New York or Paris is no longer defensible. Throw open the doors, and the salerooms.

Simon Jenkins is a journalist and author. His books include *A Short History of London: The Creation of a World Capital* (Viking, 2019)

Astrid Swenson

“Despite a language of ‘return’, restitution is often about negotiating the future, not the past”



There is no one-size-fits-all answer to this complex question. The vast majority of objects moved from their original location to a museum have no claimants. Some, though, are in museums as a result of looting and other forms of violence and coercion. The international principles that have made wartime looting illegal and led to the return of objects since the end of

the Napoleonic wars, and following the Nazi confiscations of art, have in the past rarely been applied to contexts of colonial conquest and subjugation. It is high time to address this.

Historical research is a necessary part of this process, to determine how objects were acquired. Moreover, it can help us comprehend and question why legal and moral ideas about restitution have become connected to arguments about preservation, access, use, successorship, nationalism and universalism. The history of restitution since the 19th century can also help us understand that, despite a language of ‘return’, restitution is often overwhelmingly about negotiating the future rather than the past. It has often been used to rebuild communities, and offers a way for dialogue and reconciliation.

Sometimes a straightforward ‘return’ is neither possible nor desirable – either because an object is ‘orphaned’, as is the case with some objects that belonged to Jews murdered during the Holocaust, or with objects whose provenance cannot be established. Sometimes there could be more than one ‘rightful owner’. Should the sword of Grand Master Jean de Valette, acquired by Napoleon when the Knights of Malta surrendered the island in 1798, belong to the Louvre, the Order of St John (now in Rome), or a Maltese institution?

Recent routes to resolution show the way, through loans, co-curation, and narrative panels that make changes in context visible, emphasising the trajectories and transculturality of objects and people. Solutions can allow for multiple uses – for example, a 2000 agreement between the American Museum of Natural History and the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon enables both scientific study and spiritual gatherings. The display of an object’s history can help reveal the emotions that have become attached to objects in transit, and create dialogue about underlying losses and hopes in the search for just and fair solutions. 🌐

Astrid Swenson is professor of history at Bath Spa University, and co-editor of *From Plunder to Preservation* (OUP, 2013)





BEHIND THE NEWS

Is the world changing faster than ever?

In an age when technology advances at exponential rates and social media allows communication of news and ideas at the click of a button, it can seem that the pace of change is accelerating. But is that really true? Seven historians explore this conundrum in this feature first published in 2018



Ian Mortimer

“Although life is more complex than it was, complexity itself is not change”



We must start with another question: what do we mean by ‘the world’? Some regions saw their most rapid development in the distant past – Mexico on the arrival of Cortés in 1519, for example. Local political events could also trigger a short period of extremely rapid change. Did life alter in France faster in the period 1789–94 than it has done in the past five years?

You bet it did. Likewise across Europe in the years 1347–51, as plague ravaged the continent. And just consider how people’s lives changed during the war years 1914–18 or 1939–45.

Today, technology is developing rapidly. But technology isn’t everything. Language is arguably more important, and that is comparatively static. We understand the language of Shakespeare, whereas he would not have understood more than a few words of 13th-century English. Printing standardised the language, and standardisation stops change. Many things now don’t alter at all – property ownership, driving on the left, limited liability, pasteurisation, musical notation, you name it. Even technology becomes standardised: viz, units of measurement, the ohm, ampere and volt. Most aspects of our lives are not open to yearly fluctuation – unlike in the Middle Ages, when a failed harvest or invasion might suddenly obliterate your village.

The real question is, therefore, whether technological change is so penetrating that it is changing the whole world at the same pace. If ‘now’ is the past quarter of a century, then no, I don’t think so. Although life is more complex than it was, complexity itself is not change – and much of that complexity has developed slowly, over years. Though mobile phones and the internet have changed most people’s lives, they have done so over the course of a quarter of a century. In the 25 years 1835–60, railways, the telegraph, postage and photography altered the world to a much greater extent.

If, however, ‘now’ means the past 80 years, then I think ‘the world’ is changing faster than ever. To be born in the west these days is to be given a chance to make what you can of life. You have choice. Further back in time, you were required to fill an allotted role. So you could say the world is changing faster – because everyone is independently changing his or her own world, and thus changing everyone else’s at the same time.

Ian Mortimer is a historian and novelist, and the author of three *Time Traveller’s Guides* to historic periods of England

Jane Winters

“A yearning for stability and familiarity is, and always has been, part of what makes us human”



It feels as though we are living in a time of rapid, unsettling change. The political landscape is being transformed; global economic forecasts are uncertain; technology is developing at a faster rate than most of us can even comprehend; standards in public life seem to have degenerated almost overnight. The list goes on.

But is this really new? Throughout history, societies have experienced seismic change. Empires that seemed unassailable fell, leaving behind only traces of their culture. Transformative technologies fundamentally altered the lived experience of millions, from the 15th-century invention of the printing press to the development of the atomic bomb five centuries later. Conflict and disease devastated countries and continents: the Black Death may have wiped out up to 60% of the population of Europe in under a decade in the mid-14th century. Certainties about life (and the afterlife) were overturned by the Reformation sparked in 1517. This list also goes on.

Nostalgia for a lost ‘golden age’ is threaded through human history. This might be an imagined pre-industrial pastoral, an idyllic pre-war decade, or simply a time when ‘we’ were younger and everything was comprehensible. Anxiety about the rapidity of change and a yearning for stability and familiarity are, and always have been, part of what makes us human.

So the world may not be changing faster than ever, but I do think our experience of that change is new. The speed with which information spreads today is unprecedented, and it can take a huge effort of will to disengage from the platforms that place it in front of us. Concerns about information overload are also not novel, but the ease and rapidity with which we can learn about a terrorist attack or political upheaval, speculate wildly about what caused it, and move on to the next bad news story is bewildering. And this cycle of catastrophe is a global one – the world does not sleep while we do, but is busy generating breaking news to greet us when we wake. We access this constant stream of information using technologies that we do not fully understand, and some of the news itself is only very indirectly generated by humans. Most of us will never grasp the complexities of the algorithms that are influencing our view of the world, and this too is a growing source of anxiety. Is it any wonder that it sometimes seems that things are spinning out of control?

Jane Winters is professor of digital humanities at the School of Advanced Study, University of London



A 16th-century illustration of Spanish Conquistador Hernán Cortés and his troops during their campaign against the Aztecs in 1519 – among a sequence of events that triggered rapid changes across Latin America



Enrico Fermi, the Italian-American physicist known as the 'architect of the nuclear age' who created the first nuclear reactors in the 1940s. The 20th century saw what seemed to be an unprecedented rate of change

Ian Morris

“Catapult a peasant from 1750 BC to this age of cars, computers, TV, sexual freedom – they would have a nervous breakdown”



The world is changing faster than ever before – much faster. Just look at the most basic facts. During the so-called Ice Age (the most recent glacial period, c110,000–12,000 years ago), the global human population is estimated to have doubled roughly every 10,000 years. By the time of the Roman empire, it was doubling every 1,000 years; in the 20th century, every 50 years.

Between the Ice Age and Rome, life expectancy barely budged: the typical mother lost half her offspring as children, while the other half rarely made it through their forties. Globally, this was still true in 1900, with average life expectancy at birth around 31 years – but by 2000, the average person lived 71.5 years.

Alternatively, take annual income: standards of living barely budged between 5000 BC and AD 1500. Most people made the equivalent of £800 in today's money, insofar as such conversions make sense. By 1800, the average had crept up to £1,000, but in the 19th century it doubled, and in the 20th more than quadrupled, to about £9,000.

I could go on and on, but let's look instead at what change meant. Take England: if we picked up a peasant from 1750 BC and dropped him or her down in AD 1750, just before the industrial revolution, he or she would have quickly adjusted. Some things had certainly changed: people had switched from round houses to rectangular ones, from farmsteads to (mostly) villages, from bronze to iron, from a sun god to Jesus. The rich now wore powdered wigs and corsets. A few could now read and write, some had eyeglasses, and, in 1784, a Scotsman would even fly in a balloon.

Yet so much had not changed. The basic patterns of life and death, taxes and rent, sowing and ploughing, deference to lords and ladies – the visitor from 1750 BC would recognise them all. But put that peasant back in the Tardis and catapult him or her to this age of cars, computers, TV, literacy, skyscrapers, gender reassignment, sexual freedom, democracy, nuclear weapons... our peasant would have a nervous breakdown.

Make no mistake. The world has changed more in the past 100 years than in the previous 100,000.

Ian Morris is Jean and Rebecca Willard Professor of Classics and professor of history at Stanford University, and author of *Why the West Rules – For Now: The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal About the Future* (Profile Books, 2010)

Rana Mitter

“Over the past half-century China may have changed faster than any other society on earth”



China may have changed faster over the past century than any other society on earth – certainly, faster than any society of its astonishing size and population. Suppose you were Chinese, and you were born in 1940. (Perhaps you were.) You were born into a society fighting for its life in the face of an invasion by Japan. A decade later, you were a schoolgirl being

corralled into huge parades in praise of Mao Zedong’s new socialist China. By 1970, you were a young schoolteacher persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, forced to declare yourself a “stinking” intellectual. Ten years later, you decided to abandon teaching, following new leader Deng Xiaoping’s exhortation to “jump into the sea” of business. Since then, you’ve seen China shift from a poor, agrarian country to become the second-biggest economy in the world, with a highly authoritarian government whose policies combine urbanisation, economic growth and high-technology surveillance.

What has enabled China to change so fast? A key factor has been control. The authoritarian rule under which China has existed since the victory of the Communists has enabled top-down decisions to be made, often at great speed, without the deliberation needed in a democracy. This has led to disaster, as in the Great Leap Forward of 1958–62, when top-down orders demanding unfeasible levels of grain production in China’s countryside led to mass famine. It has also unleashed major social change, such as the turn from top-down socialism to capitalism (tactfully called “socialism with Chinese characteristics” by the Chinese Communist Party) that created the economic miracle after 1978.

Speed of change has undoubtedly been faster in China because of the system of government. However, there has been frequent resistance. Today, environmental protests provide one example of how people are pushing back against rapid, often destructive change. The protests are also a warning to those who argue that swift decision-making is valuable in itself. Rather, it depends on the results. A China that had made decisions more deliberatively might be a little poorer, but it might also have more of its forests and cultural heritage – both victims of the swift changes of the past half-century.

Rana Mitter is professor of the history and politics of modern China at Oxford University and author of *China’s Good War: How World War II is Shaping a New Nationalism*, set to be published later this year

Keith Lowe

“The Second World War and its aftermath caused huge geopolitical changes that are almost unimaginable today”



Every generation likes to believe it is unique. I like to remind my 14-year-old son that when I was his age there was no such thing as the mobile phone, nor the internet. It was my generation that created these things he now takes for granted.

However, when we recently sat down with my grandmother, who is nearly 100 years old, she reminded us both that she grew up in an age before computers, before television, even before commercial radio. When she was a girl, there were no jets, or rockets, or nuclear power. There were no microwave ovens or electric dishwashers. Antibiotics had yet to be discovered. Most of these things were a product of the 1930s, 40s and 50s, and their development was massively accelerated by the major event of her lifetime – the Second World War.

The war and its aftermath also caused huge geopolitical changes that are almost unimaginable today. When my grandmother got married in 1938, much of the world was still coloured pink, denoting the vast reach of the British empire, which became the Commonwealth. By the time my father got married, 30 years later, the age of European empires was already long over. My father’s generation witnessed the United Nations grow from 51 member states to 193 today, an increase largely due to the collapse of empires during that generation’s teenage years.

We might marvel at how fast the world is changing, but are today’s social upheavals really any greater than those of the 1950s, when car use and consumer culture boomed, or the 1960s, when teenagers sought to change the world, or the 1970s, when mass tourism became possible? Momentous events are indeed taking place today, but they build on equally momentous events that were brought about by previous generations – and they in turn provide a platform for changes yet to come.

My son is already looking towards a future of driverless cars, artificial intelligence, post-Brexit Britain and Chinese dominance in world affairs. Will he too, I wonder, believe that these changes are greater, deeper and faster than those that we marvel at today?

Keith Lowe is a historian and writer, author of *Prisoners of History: What Monuments Tell Us about Our History and Ourselves* (William Collins, 2020)

Michael Scott

“In the distant past change came very fast indeed – for example, the birth of the pyramid tombs of Egypt”



It can so often seem as if life is speeding up – especially when we think back to ancient civilisations. Their surviving monuments seem frozen in time; it's anathema to imagine their world changing faster than ours.

But that does not mean there were not moments in the distant past when change came very fast indeed. The birth of the pyramid tomb of Egypt is one example.

Rulers, like other elites in ancient Egyptian society, had most often been buried in mastabas – rectangular, single-storey mud-brick tombs. But then, in the third dynasty of the Old Kingdom (c2649–2575 BC), the pharaoh Djoser, with his architect Imhotep, broke with tradition and created the first pyramid tomb at Saqqara, the necropolis linked to the capital at Memphis.

Scholars disagree about the source of their inspiration. Theories include that the stepped pyramid emerged from the idea of building one mastaba on top of another; that the shape reflected the primordial mound in Egyptian myth from which all life emerged; that it represented a stairway to heaven for the pharaoh – or that it was simply a tall structure that would dominate the skyline and be seen from the capital.

Whatever the motivation, Djoser's example was followed by his successors, who developed the smooth-sided pyramid. The rulers of the fourth dynasty (2575–2465 BC) took this technology and supersized it, creating the pyramids at Giza, the only surviving wonders of the ancient world. The Great Pyramid at Giza, constructed for the pharaoh Khufu, incorporates 2.3 million cut stones, each of enormous proportions. But though pharaohs continued building pyramids into the mid-second millennium BC, they never again reached those proportions.

The time between the birth of the pyramid at Saqqara and its most impressive incarnation at Giza was less than 100 years, and from Djoser's pyramid to the time of construction of the entire Giza Pyramid complex less than 200 years. What's so fascinating about this example is not only the speed with which the birth of an idea (a pyramid) could morph into the most magnificent symbol of a civilisation (the Great Pyramid), but also how such an innovation has also become an eternal icon for mankind's creativity, ingenuity and determination. Sometimes very rapid changes in our world have eternal impacts.

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Felipe Fernández-Armesto

“Consumption increased twentyfold per capita worldwide on average in the course of the 20th century”



Even a century ago, measurable change leapt off the graph paper. Theorists groped for explanations. The German-American anthropologist Franz Boas thought the change was inherently “ever-increasing”. In 1917, his near-contemporary Robert Lowie postulated a threshold beyond which culture “gathers momentum”.

The biggest – but barely noticed – indicator of accelerating change has been consumption, which increased twentyfold per capita worldwide over the 20th century. World population – an area of growth that excited Malthusian fears (of an imminent crash in a population that outstrips production) and ignited population controls – quadrupled. Madcap consumption contributed to growing global environmental stresses. Because people used far more goods in industrialised, urbanised communities, especially in the United States, than anywhere else, the spread of industrialisation and urbanisation guaranteed that consumption would continue to hurtle out of control to what are now – or soon will be – probably unsustainable levels.

Production rose inescapably with consumer demand, while the range of products multiplied bewilderingly, especially in pursuit of techno-gadgetry, medical services and remedies, and of money-making financial and commercial instruments. The world became rapidly unrecognisable to the ageing, whose lives were unprecedentedly prolonged wherever death-defying medical technologies were available.

The accelerations of change jar security, well-being and confidence in the future, and induce spectral fears. When people feel the threat of change, they reach for ‘order’. Hence the triumphs of noisy little men who promise simple solutions. The herd turns on suspected agents of change: immigrants, for instance, or international institutions. Because reactionaries thrive amid fears of instability, the most effective revolutionaries of recent times have called for religious fundamentalism, or primitive communism or anarchism, or the apple-cheeked innocence of an era before the industrial revolution. Intellectuals flee to anomie, moral relativism, and indeterminacy. Change may be good. It is always dangerous. 🌐

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